

THE ISLAMIC EDUCATION SYSTEM IN CONTEMPORARY RUSSIA: FORMATION AND CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

The paper deals with the formation of the Islamic Education System in Contemporary Russia. The post-Soviet period was marked with religious enthusiasm and the opening of different Muslim educational institutions. Some of them inclined to Islamic radicalism. Though Hanafi legal school (madhhab) was traditional for Volga region, Muslim radicals tried to spread Salafi interpretation. So it came to the confrontation between the older and younger generations of Muslims. There appeared the importance and urgent necessity of creating a full-fledged Muslim educational system built on the basis of historical traditions and adapted to the Russian reality. The paper describes problems which Islamic educational institutions face. Among them: the problem of licenses, the problem of accommodation and salary for the graduates – imams, the Personnel problems, the problem of funding and the problem of preparation of methodological materials. The paper also gives information about present situation in the sphere of the Russian Islamic Education System. We come to the conclusion that only a developed system of Islamic education is possible to make positive adjustments to the process of bringing back Islam to the public and political life of Russian society.

Keywords: the Islamic Education System, Hanafi legal school (madhhab), Islamic radicalism, Muslim educational institutions, regional Muslim Spiritual Boards (DUM), Muslim parishes (mahalla).

INTRODUCTION

The first Muslim schools appeared in Russia in the post-Soviet period at the end of the 1980's. This was a time of spontaneous opening of Muslim educational institutions, though they had not yet fully fit into the legal and educational domains of Russia and had no permanent sources of funding. These institutions were mostly created based on the initiative of various foreign Muslim charities [1, 108 p.]. They provided funds and teaching staff. It was their operation that created quite powerful centers of Muslim separatism in the Volga-Urals region, and acting independently they were able to organize influential centers of Islamic radicalism. Among these centers, "Yoldyz" in Naberezhnye Chelny and "Al-Furqan" in Buguruslan madrasas were especially distinguished. Islamic radicalization in these institutions and the whole region is characterized by its theological orientation. Through the educational system Muslim radicals spread Salafi interpretation, a non-traditional doctrine for Russian Muslims, and thereby gradually drove out the Hanafi legal school (madhhab), the more traditional one in this region, from daily religious practice. Formally, these institutions were under the authority of regional Muslim Spiritual Boards (DUM), but in reality they were independent from them [2, 66 p.].

This was a period of religious enthusiasm and an active return to religious values in Russia. It was considered very important after 80 years of atheism to bring religion back into life. But in what form? Not many people pondered over this question at the time. Many believed that any religious knowledge was better than atheistic views. Subsequent experience has shown that it is much more complicated. During this period the government was an outside observer, and had not been building any definite policies in the

sphere of state-religious relations. In particular, it did not form any policies for Muslim education [3, 112 p.].

The first problem of Muslim education, or more precisely the results of Muslim schools' activities, emerged after the entrance of these madrasas' graduates into Muslim parishes (mahalla) in Russia. Theologically well-educated graduates found themselves far different from the traditional Russian Muslims. Young imams sincerely tried to convince their parishioners that the true spiritual values were far beyond the traditions of their ancestors. Therefore in those parishes with elder practitioners of Russian Islamic traditions, discrepancy erupted between the older generation of Muslims and the young imams.

Young imams also faced another difficult problem. They needed to clearly define their religious identity. They began to notice that Islam is unique and at the same time diverse; it consists of various theological and juridical schools that not only shape Muslims' world views, but also allow them to adapt to different conditions and accordingly to understand what is happening around them. What they had brought back home was a religious system that was formed under the conditions of a mono-confessional society. This is unacceptable in Russia, not so much because it is not a part of the religious traditions of Russian Muslims, but because of its values that recognize only exclusive confessional spaces [4, 325 p.].

METHODS

This system has no knowledge of Muslims' behavior within a multi-religious environment. It also does not permit a constant intellectual quest for determination of one's place in this changing world. This doctrine affects primarily young people, who with full conviction boast their spiritual superiority and try to set themselves against other coreligionists. Eventually they will meet confusion and rejection from those around them. This embitters the young generation and they try to assert themselves by radical methods. So, what kind of people did the first Muslim schools produce? They were a group of youth with limited intelligence and no national characteristics, but they tried to convince others of the correctness of the Islam with which they had familiarized themselves far from their homeland.

Secular intellectuals also did not contribute to the formation of the complete system of Islamic education over the years. On the contrary they showed obstinate constancy in their atheistic beliefs [5, 18 p.]. They still stand as outside observers in the process of religious revival. Their position is defined by an arrogant, derogatory attitude to the contemporary Muslim clergy: "I will not go to mosque as long as they explain basics of Islam on such a primitive level. Later we will see." When they start talking about Islam, they will definitely praise Jadidism¹ as a "hope and support" of Russia's Islam.

It should be noted that unfortunately, the return of religion to the Russian society in the 1990s did not become a factor of spiritual consolidation. On the contrary, we witness polarization of views concerning Islam progressing further.

This problem which has developed into the confrontation between the older and younger generations of Muslims in some places has once again shed light on the importance and urgent necessity of creating a full-fledged Muslim educational system. This system should be built on the basis of historical traditions and should adapt to the Russian reality [6, 23 p.].

During this period there was another problem deriving from the need to define the place of Muslim educational institutions in Russian legislation and the educational system. This problem should not arise,

¹ Jadidism is a phenomenon of Islamic reformists' movements in late imperial Russia. It produced a new generation of not only religious scholars but also Muslim intellectuals seeking social and political roles beyond Islamic scholarly tradition.

since these educational institutions worked under the jurisdiction of the Muslim Spiritual Boards in the regions of Russia and trained imams for their own parishes.

It is not surprising that almost all religious educational institutions of Russia operated under the license of regional ministries and departments of education; this is because they had the right to issue licenses only to low-level educational institutions. This problem is related not only to the legal status of educational institutions but also directly concerns their graduates who do not stay in the mosques, because communities have no financial capabilities to keep imams in the mosques. Once an imam comes to a village, it is necessary to provide him with accommodation and salary. The young imam did not stay in the village if these conditions were not met.

Many of the regional Muslim Spiritual Boards see the solution of this situation in giving clearer legal status to madrasas so that they issue legitimate state diplomas. If alongside religious knowledge madrasa students could obtain legitimate diplomas allowing them to work in state institutions, they could perform many other functions (in particular work in schools) in addition to the responsibilities of the imams. There is also another point of view: if a future imam receives secular education in parallel, then he will have a choice, which will unlikely be a Muslim parish. Indeed it is hard to disagree with this opinion.

In the beginning the Muslim educational system all over central Russia has been constructed with financial and personnel support from international Islamic charities, which in the early 1990s completely controlled this domain [7, 267 p.]. From the mid-90s the situation apparently changed. Many international funds in Russia were forced to terminate their activities; Arab teaching staff left religious schools. They were replaced mostly by Russian Muslim teachers who had been trained either by these Arabs or in Muslim countries. The educational system built by Arabs has not ceased, which accounts for the absence of a clear national and theological orientation in various types of religious schools until now. So-called modernized "pure" Islam that has been taught in Muslim schools in Russia zealously alienated itself from traditional legal schools (madhhab), treated ethnic components disparagingly, and did not recognize any system of customs and rituals. It created problems rather than supporting the revival of Islam in the country.

RESULTS

Today there are ten Muslim educational institutions in Tatarstan. This number is optimal as long as they meet the needs of Muslim communities in the republic. There are about 1,300 Muslim communities in the Republic today. If you keep in mind the fact that each year about 100 imams graduate from Muslim schools of Tatarstan, it is easy to calculate that the years of the existence of these institutions should have been enough to meet the demand for imams in Tatarstan mosques. However, according to the Muslim Spiritual Board of the Republic of Tatarstan, only 10-15% communities are staffed by educated imams today [8, 143 p.].

This is of course not only due to Islamic school graduates' unwillingness to work in rural mosques. Today primary Muslim communities (mahalla) indeed do not have the capacity to maintain clergy and schools or to build and repair mosques and madrasas with their own means. Although they have received state registration, they have not become an independent unit of the Muslim community yet. It should be noted that in an industrial society, people are not united so much by traditional personal relationships and affection within their religious community, as by ideological aims and symbols. Islam today has ceased to be merely a source of identity in the family and community, and has become one of the most important elements of ethnic identity and ideological thinking about the present reality.

Religious leaders have no ready remedies for these problems. Sadly, there is also no clear understanding that they must be solved through internal resources, without forming consumer psychology. It is still too early to say that the Russian Muslims today have turned to their spiritual and religious traditions deriving

from centuries of trials in creating a particular type of Muslim community that can function in a multi-confessional environment.

DISCUSSIONS

Opening of Islamic universities in the late 1990s was a new stage in the development of Muslim education in Russia. The first was the Russian Islamic University founded in Kazan in 1998.

Russian Islamic University (RIU) is one of the first and the largest institutions of Islamic higher education in Russia and the CIS countries. The university was founded in Kazan in 1998. The founders of RIU are Russia Muftis Council, the Muslim Spiritual Board of the Republic of Tatarstan, and the Institute of History named after Sh. Marjani within the Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Tatarstan.

Later Islamic universities were established in Ufa, Moscow, Makhachkala, Nalchik, and finally in Grozny. This signified not only the appearance of new types of Muslim schools but also a new stage in the formation of state-Islam relations. It was in this period that the Russian society as well as governmental bodies realized that they should create conditions in order to bring back to spiritual and social-political life of Russian society not religious values alien to real life, but those traditions that the Russian Muslims had elaborated for many centuries. Today, we need to train Muslim religious leaders and scholars capable of understanding the needs and particularities of multi-confessional society and acting properly in Russian society.

Muslim educational institutions in general and universities in particular are charged with the primary mission of training highly educated religious leaders. However, an institution such as a university in modern conditions obviously cannot limit itself to the training of religious leaders only. This is why the training of Muslim intellectuals and theologians became one of the main tasks of the Islamic universities. A group of Muslim intellectuals should operate in the society so that they hold objective information about Islam, and thereby at least diminish, if not eliminate entirely, the grounds for Islamophobic attitudes, and support traditions of tolerant relations.

CONCLUSION

There are of course many problems in new Muslim schools.

1. Personnel problems. Substantial changes took place in this area in recent years. The most noteworthy is that these schools are mostly staffed by their own teaching personnel who received their theological education at the largest international Islamic institutions of Egypt, Malaysia, Jordan, Syria and other countries [9, 208 p.]. It is good to note that among the teachers there are alumni of these schools, who have come back after improving their knowledge in other educational institutions. Unfortunately among the teaching staff there are still not enough doctoral candidates and doctoral degree holders. Such people are mandatory for the full development of a Russian university. Though these teachers are of high professional quality, they represent very different theological and pedagogical schools. This may create many problems in establishing a unified education system.

2. Funding. Islamic schools, as well as Islamic organizations, do not have stable financial resources and material or technical resources. The Muslim community in Russia has not managed to build a charitable fund system yet, nor does *waqf* (pious endowment) function. Religious organizations positioning themselves as "Zakat" foundations do not discharge their direct missions. This certainly makes Islamic institutions take a somewhat conformist position, which is primarily expressed by apparent loyalty to government bodies. Since the state, in turn, does not always reinforce this loyalty by providing financial support, these institutions are forced to take into account the interests of those providing them with funds from outside. This situation creates a problem in the area of theological interpretation of Islam, especially in disseminating a particular legal school (madhhab).

Since 2007 the Foundation for the Support of Islamic Culture, Science, and Education has been actively involved in providing grants for the support of educational process and for academic publishing activities of Muslim educational institutions.

3. Legal status. This issue has always been a problem for religious schools in a secular state. For the solution of this problem an amendment was introduced to the federal law "on education," which opened new opportunities for religious schools. At least they may increase their legal status up to the level of state educational institutions and issue legitimate state diplomas to graduates.

4. Preparation of methodological materials. The formation of a full-fledged publishing system is also related to the training of appropriate staff. The main concern in this area is literature on training methodology, which is published and used as textbooks in Islamic educational institutions.

The complexity of the situation in the Muslim community (umma) of Russia is demonstrated by the fact that the process of bringing back Islamic values to society is accompanied by an attempt to replace the traditional ritual system [10, 312 p.]. Those uneducated and unfamiliar with particularities of Islam in various regions of Russia regard these changes as a return to the true Islam. It is only a developed system of Islamic education that makes it possible to make positive adjustments to this difficult process of bringing back Islam to the public and political life of Russian society.

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