



Testimony at the Hearing on “The Threat of Islamic Extremism in Russia”  
The House Committee on Foreign Affairs  
Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia, and Emerging Threats

# The Expansion of Russia’s Radical Islamism Outside the North Caucasus

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*The views expressed in this testimony are those of the author alone and do not necessarily represent those of the American Enterprise Institute.*

Thank you Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, Members of the Committee:

On the morning of July 19, 2012, Kazan the capital of Tatarstan, Russia's largest autonomous republic and home of its largest Muslim ethnicity, the Tatars, was awakened by six gun shots and, fifteen minutes later, the explosion of a car bomb. The shots were aimed at Valiulla Yakupov, Deputy Mufti of Tatarstan and leading theologian who supervised Islamic education in Tatarstan, as he walked out of his apartment building. The bomb went off under the car of Yakupov's boss, Mufti Ildus Fayzov. Yakupov was killed instantly. Fayzov was badly injured.<sup>1</sup>

Since their appointment a year before, Fayzov and Yakupov had been crusading "anti-Wahhabists," out to strengthen the traditional, moderate Hanafi *madhab* (one of the five major branches of Sunni Islam) by firing imams and madrasa teachers who they felt were too tolerant of the more radical Salafism, including the Imam of the of Kazan's main *mechet* (mosque) Kul Sharif.<sup>2</sup> Lest anyone miss the terrorists' point, a cavalcade of cars driving under the black-and-white banners of global jihadists raced through downtown Kazan.<sup>3</sup>

Yet there was more to what happened that morning in Kazan than an internecine struggle within Europe's oldest and, until a decade or so ago, most assimilated Muslim minority. The July 19<sup>th</sup> attacks may well have been a watershed: two decades after the first Chechen war, the Russian Jihad may be reaching a tipping point at which the center of gravity of militant Islamic fundamentalism has begun to shift from the North Caucasus to the more urban and densely populated European Russian heartland, the home of 13 million Muslims, especially Tatars and Bashkirs. If this trend continues, the consequences for the largest Muslim country in Europe (with an estimated Muslim population of 20 million) and the world at large could be ominous.

Although the most dramatic, the 2012 attack was only an instance of a trend. Here are a few more examples:

- Of European countries, Russia and Britain had the largest number of their nationals at Guantanamo Bay prison: nine each. The Russian nationals included some of the longest held prisoners. Six out of nine were ethnic Tatars.<sup>4</sup>
- Awaiting sentencing after a trial last month in the federal district court in Richmond is a former commander of the Taliban-affiliated Haqqani Network in Afghanistan -- the first Taliban officer tried in a civilian court in the United States.<sup>5</sup> The defendant, Irek Hamidullin, is an ethnic Tatar from the most radicalized of Tatarstan's largest cities, Naberezhnye Chelny, which a leading

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<sup>1</sup> <http://kazanweek.ru/article/4276/>

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.regnum.ru/news/polit/1670767.html>

<sup>4</sup> <http://projects.nytimes.com/guantanamo/country/russia>  
[http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5bttnews%5d=3258&no\\_cache=1#.Va1EIKRVhHx](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5bttnews%5d=3258&no_cache=1#.Va1EIKRVhHx)

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.voanews.com/content/ap-unusual-terror-case-going-to-trial-in-us-court-in-virginia/2886773.html>

Russian expert called “a focal point for Salafism in Tatarstan.”<sup>6</sup>

- In November 2013 a rocket attack was mounted against a major Russian oil-refining facility in Nizhnekamsk, Tatarstan. The assailants used self-made Qassam missiles associated with the Palestinian Hamas.
- In May 2013, National Anti-Terrorist Committee (NAK) troops engaged in a firefight with a terrorist cell in the town of Orekhovo-Zuevo, 85 kilometers from Moscow, where the terrorists had travelled allegedly to engage in bombing attacks in the Russian capital. Two of them were killed and one wounded and captured. All three were ethnic Bashkirs, Russia’s second largest Muslim ethnic group after the Tatars and very close to them ethnically and geographically.
- In the early 2000s, the so-called Uigur-Bulgar Jamaat (UBJ) was set up by Al Qaeda in the border areas between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Among its members were Tatars, Bashkirs and Uighurs from China and Kazakhstan.<sup>7</sup> Reportedly organized with the “direct participation” of Osama bin Laden,<sup>8</sup> the UBJ was ordered by Al Qaeda to “create a network of cells” throughout Russia.<sup>9</sup> Until the Russian authorities blocked the Jamaat’s site in 2011, it posted Russian-language video and radio materials, including interviews with Russian “resistance fighters” inside the Jamaat.<sup>10</sup>
- Between 2006 and 2008 a UBJ cell was set up in Bashkortostan. Its leader, the 36-year old ethnic Russian convert Abdul Mudzhib (Pavel Dorokhov) was reported to have trained in Taliban and Al Qaeda camps in the mid-1990s and again in 2006-7.<sup>11</sup> Dorokhov was killed while resisting arrest by Russian special forces in August 2008. His deputy was sentenced to 15 years at a “strict regime” colony. According to the trial documents, they recruited members to “prepare terrorist acts against vital objects of Bashkortostan and against law enforcement personnel.”<sup>12</sup> Two years later, eight members of the UBJ were arrested in Bashkortostan.<sup>13</sup>
- One of the UBJ leaders, an ethnic Tatar by the name of Rais Mingaleev who had proclaimed himself “Amir of the Tatar Mujahidin” and travelled repeatedly to the training camps on the Afghani-Pakistani border,<sup>14</sup> was the mastermind of the attack on Fayzov and Yakupov. After Mingaleev’s death, the actual killer of Yakupov, Robert Valeev, became the new leader of the “Tatar Jamaat.” A year later, members of the Jamaat [were reported to be among the “militants from Russia” fighting in Syria].<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Sergey Markedonov, CSIS, January 2013, “The Rise of Radical and Nonofficial Islamic Groups in Russia’s Volga Region,” pg. 18., <http://goo.gl/LlrNij>.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.business-gazeta.ru/text/69270/>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php?st=1351234020>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.kommersant.ru/Doc/1014330>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.business-gazeta.ru/text/69270/>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.kommersant.ru/Doc/1014330> and <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/1207571>

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/1207571>

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.business-gazeta.ru/text/69270/>

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php?st=1351234020>

<sup>15</sup> [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=41049&no\\_cache=1#.Vdl3N-nZr8F](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=41049&no_cache=1#.Vdl3N-nZr8F)

- According to the leader of Tatar Muslim “Public Center” in Naberezhnye Chelny, 200 Tatar “radical Muslims” were fighting in Syria in summer 2013<sup>16</sup> -- as were, according to the Federal Security Service (FSB) 50 Bashkirs.<sup>17</sup> In addition, “several dozen” Bashkirs were said to have been trained in terrorist camps in the area around the Pakistan-Afghanistan border.<sup>18</sup>

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This possible shift of the center of gravity of the Russian jihad from the North Caucasus to European Russia has been long in the making. Let me mention just a few causes. Most of them continue to operate today as risk factors that increase the likelihood of terrorist attacks in Russia and heighten Russia’s vulnerability to such attacks:

To begin, after the fall of the Soviet Union, the pent-up demand for religion and religious education, which affected Russian Muslims (as it did members of all other religious denominations of Russia) was met with a dearth of native clergy. As a result, an estimated “tens of thousands”<sup>19</sup> of Russian Muslims (many of them, future Russian imams) received education in the Middle East, mostly in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Syria and Tunisia.<sup>20</sup> In the process, many of the students have been exposed to Salafism and Wahhabism – not just in such notoriously Salafi-leaning centers as the University of Medina,<sup>21</sup> the Jeddah University,<sup>22</sup> or the King Abdul-Aziz University in Saudi Arabia.<sup>23</sup> On their return to Tatarstan and Bashkortostan, some of these imams have increasingly turned away from the traditional, moderate *Hanafi* madhab (or school of Islamic theology) and toward the more fundamentalist Salafism or even Wahhabism. According to Russian experts Imams who share Wahhabi views preach and serve in dozens of the over Tatar 1,000 mosques, especially in Naberezhnye Chelny.<sup>24</sup>

- Russia is now home to millions of guest workers, most of them from Muslim Central Asia. There are an estimated two and a half million of only registered migrants in Moscow alone,<sup>25</sup> making it the largest Muslim city in Europe.<sup>26</sup> Often without work permits; marginalized, culturally and

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<sup>16</sup> <http://www.regnum.ru/news/polit/1670767.html>

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.km.ru/v-rossii/2013/06/07/federalnaya-sluzhba-bezopasnosti-rf-fsb/712634-fsb-zavershila-likvidatsiyu-bandg;>

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.km.ru/v-rossii/2013/06/07/federalnaya-sluzhba-bezopasnosti-rf-fsb/712634-fsb-zavershila-likvidatsiyu-bandg;>

<sup>19</sup> Alikberov, op.cit.

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.interfax-religion.ru/?act=radio&div=1811>

<sup>21</sup> [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/23/opinion/isis-atrocities-started-with-saudi-support-for-salafi-hate.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/23/opinion/isis-atrocities-started-with-saudi-support-for-salafi-hate.html?_r=0)

<sup>22</sup> <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/the-great-salafi-gamble-7720>

<sup>23</sup> [http://orfonline.org/cms/export/orfonline/modules/orfpapers/attachments/wilson1\\_1374144886603.pdf](http://orfonline.org/cms/export/orfonline/modules/orfpapers/attachments/wilson1_1374144886603.pdf)

<sup>24</sup> Malashenko, Aleksey, Carnegie Endowment, August 31, 2012, “No Repeat of Chechnya,” <http://goo.gl/Xt3j9X>. See also <sup>24</sup> Rais Suleimanov, “Salafism in Tatarstan: On the verge of war,” *Agenstvo Politicheskikh Novostey*, December 15, 2010, <http://newsland.com/news/detail/id/607026/>

<sup>25</sup> <http://www.mskagency.ru/materials/1609913>

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.ibtimes.com/moscow-largest-muslim-city-europe-faithful-face-discrimination-public-authorities-2020858>

ethnically; and often subject to abuse, extortion, and, not infrequently, to racist violence many of these men understandably turn to the faith of their grandparents as a means to sustain dignity. As a result, Tajiks, or Kyrgyz, or Uzbeks who would not have known the way to the nearest mosque in Dushanbe, Bishkek or Tashkent have become zealous Muslims in Moscow, with at least some falling under the influence of radical clerics. As a result, Moscow has become the base for so-called spotters and recruiters for ISIS from all over Russia and the Soviet Union and a key way station on the road to Syria. No one knows precisely how many spotters and recruiters are working in the city, but the estimates run all the way to several hundred. Most troubling is the recent statement by the Secretary of the Security Council, Nikolai Patrushev that at the moment, Russian authorities do not have the means to stem the flow of volunteers to ISIS.<sup>27</sup> The Russian Foreign Ministry estimates that there are around 2,400 Russian-speakers among the jihadist in Syria,<sup>28</sup> while the total of Russian nationals and those from the former Soviet Union in the ranks of ISIS could be as high as 5,000.<sup>29</sup> Today, Russian is the third most popular ISIS language after Arabic and English.<sup>30</sup>

- ISIS's recruitment effort from the post-Soviet states is likely to grow. According to Egypt's Administration for Religious Regulations, as Arab states clamped down on ISIS efforts the group's leadership decided that it would be "quite easy to recruit supporters" in Central Asia, along with a few other vulnerable spots around the world, because Muslims there are "numerous, not acquainted with the extremist ideology of the group, and have been inclined to trust Arab proselytizers."<sup>31</sup> Given the permeability of borders and relatively unimpeded flows of people, such efforts are likely to result in the increasing radicalization of the elements of the Central Asia diaspora in Russia. This danger factor will increase multi-fold should the Taliban continue to undermine the central authority in Kabul and almost certainly attempts to destabilize Central Asia, starting with Tajikistan.
- How long will it be before the "surplus" of ISIS recruits is directed toward terrorism inside Russia? How many of Islamic State's former Russian soldiers, upon their return home, will take up the causes of the "Caliphate" inside Russia? As early as 2012, the Rector of the Russian Islamic University in Kazan, Rafik Mukhametshin warned that "long before the [2012] assassination in Kazan, experts talked about how the [Tatar] fighters will return home and some of them will continue to be in touch with radical Islamic forces. And I don't exclude the possibility that, trained elsewhere, they may emerge in Tatarstan – or have emerged already."<sup>32</sup>
- Finally, adding to other multiple risks of Putin's decision to intervene militarily in Syria, is a significantly increased probability of retaliatory terrorist attacks inside Russia.

Clearly, as the risk factors and trends I have outlined, continue to exist, expand and converge, the forecast for Russia and the world is far from optimistic.

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<sup>27</sup> <http://www.novayagazeta.ru/news/1694665.html>

<sup>28</sup> "Putin Said to Plan Islamic State Strike With or Without U.S." Bloomberg, September 23, 2015

<sup>29</sup> <http://lenta.ru/news/2015/06/17/igil/>

<sup>30</sup> <http://ria.ru/world/20150619/1079078702.html>

<sup>31</sup> [ria.ru/world/20150813/1181220263.html](http://ria.ru/world/20150813/1181220263.html), in Paul Goble, "Window on Eurasia. August 14, 2015.

<sup>32</sup> <http://www.business-gazeta.ru/text/69270/>

In conclusion, let me make one point very clear. Like overwhelming majorities of Muslims everywhere, most Russian Muslims practice their religion peacefully, abhor violence, and are good citizens and patriots of their country. Yet as we have learned only too well in the 14 years since 9/11, the radicalization of a small minority, usually not registered by opinion polls and denied by the authorities and traditional clergy, can inflict incalculable damage and cost thousands of lives.

If the evidence outlined in this article does not result in a significant increase in national and international terrorism, I will be the first to acknowledge and celebrate my error. But having largely missed the rise of Chechen terrorism, Al Qaeda, and ISIS, we would be far better off wrong than sorry.

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