

Muftis in Moscow: The Diplomatic Discourse of Adjudicating Islamic Law in Russia

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The Russian Mufti Council in Moscow, which explicitly seeks to “strengthen the stability of Russia” and help “build civil society” positions itself as a representative body of Russia’s Muslims and a patriotic vehicle of both “national diplomacy” and “people’s diplomacy” in the region and abroad, such as in Central Asia and the Middle East. Religious opinions and official statements by the Council and its Muftis published online reveal the legacies of Muslim boards and policies from the Soviet period and demonstrate how Muslim jurists today legislate Islamic affairs with respect to nationalism, civil society, and matters of the state. In addition to being engaged in domestic affairs, the Mufti Council also engages in international cooperation with religious scholars in Qatar, Egypt, and other countries in the Middle East as well as Central Asia. While the Mufti Council does work in concert with the Russian government and media, there have also been some noticeable tensions and disagreements between the Council and Russian legislative bodies in the past few years related to Islamic dress, Islamic texts, and the construction of mosques.

Many of the pronouncements of the Mufti Council involve denunciations of extremism -- both Islamic extremism and Islamophobia (or xenophobia more generally). The Mufti Council’s comments on the conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan, Palestine, Chechnya, Dagestan, South Ossetia and Abkhazia align directly with Russian foreign policy. While the body purports to be independent from the government, its religious opinions on these war-ridden geographies do line up with Russia’s foreign policy stances and objectives; however, there are a few noticeable deviations.

Fatwas, or religion opinions, from Russia's Mufti Council comment on and regulate many diverse questions and concerns of the Muslim community regarding Islamic beliefs and practices. These Islamic legal opinions and the discourse undergirding them highlight social and cultural issues that are particular to the region (related to "civil society"), such as questions about adoption, "Foundations of Orthodox Culture" taught in the national curriculum, Christian and Muslim missionaries, the permissibility of drinking vodka, xenophobia, and language policies related to issues from the Soviet period. Muftis in Russia, like those in Central Asia, have voiced concerns about whether or not Sufism (Islamic mysticism) and certain folk traditions are in alignment with Islamic law. In terms of fatwas on Soviet history, religious officials on the Council embrace the Jadid reformers of the 19th century as "indigenous" examples and templates of "reform" from "within" Russia's borders.

Nationalizing Islam: Promoting "Russian Islam"

Out of the 160 "nationalities" who live in Moscow, thirty such "nationalities" are Muslim – people who spiritually, culturally, and ethnically identify with Islam. Around 1 to 2 million Muslims live in Moscow, with the lowest cited figured being 300,000. In addition to the Tatars who were present at the dawn of Moscow's construction, Moscow is also home to Central Asians (Tajiks, Kyrgyz, Uzbeks, and Kazakhs), Azerbaijanis, Turks, Persians, Arabs, Bosnians, and of course different groups from the Caucasus. Overall, Russia has a population of about 20 million Muslims. Despite the significant size of the Muslim population of Moscow, there are only a handful of mosques in the capital.

The Russian Mufti Council is the body which provides outreach to Muslims within Russia and acts as a diplomatic arm for relations with Muslim countries and state actors outside of Russia.

In addition, the Council oversees the Moscow International Qur'an Reciting Competition, Moscow Halal Expo exhibition, Mawlid an-Nabi (Birthday of the Prophet Muhammad celebrations), the Tent of Ramadan, the International Muslim Forum, as well as conferences on Islamic banking and regional cooperation with other Muslim religious boards. In 2003/5, Russia entered the Organization of the Islamic Conference as a permanent observer, opening the door to deeper and more sustained engagement between Muslims in the Russian Federation and the Muslim world.

The Russian Muftis Council promotes “moderate” Islam in the tradition of the Hanafi school of jurisprudence. Mufti Ravil Gaynutdin has stressed the importance of keeping to the tenets of the Hanafi madhab and protecting it from being challenged by other schools of jurisprudence which are associated with more fundamentalist interpretations and practices:

We, the Tatars, follow the Hanafi madhhab. In Tajikistan, I know, much is being done for the development of the Hanafi school of thought. And the spiritual administration is doing everything in order to continue their traditional madhhab. In Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan and other republics people are trying to preserve the traditional school of thought. Dear Brothers, we really need to continue our traditional Hanafi madhhab, and develop it. It's not in vain that our ancestors thousands of years kept their own madhhab.

The RMC sees the promotion and protection of the Hanafi madhab as essential for stabilizing the situation among the Muslims of the Commonwealth of Independent States. Similar to Central Asian countries, the RMC frames the “main instrument of anti-radicals and sectarians” as the promotion by the official Muslim religious boards in cooperation with the state authorities of the Hanafi school of thought. They have recommended that another effective counter measure to radical and sectarian organizations is centralizing information and Islamic education under the control of an

official Religious Board of Muslims. The RMC also actively promotes the ideas of “Al-wasatya,” or moderation in Islam, and “Islam Khadari” – a “civilizational understanding of Islam reflecting the importance both of the political and economic progress and social harmony.” In their promotion of “moderation,” they frequently cite a saying of the Prophet Muhammad: “Islam is the religion of the middle and does not allow extremes.” They frame these concepts as the basis of Islam, a way of life, and the true values of Islam.

When Putin met with muftis in Ufa from Russia’s Muslim spiritual administrations to celebrate the 225th anniversary of the foundation of the Muslim Spiritual Assembly established by imperial decree, noted that Islam has “made an invaluable contribution to our society’s spiritual and cultural development.” He praised spiritual leaders for their moral authority and called for clergy to be “educated and enlightened people who can give a clear and impeccable canonical assessment of the most painful challenges and threats we face today.” Most importantly, Putin articulated his desire to promote “Russian Islam” that is “based on centuries of national experience in religious education and its rich theological heritage.” To do this, he pledged to help “reconstruct our own Islamic theological school, which will ensure the sovereignty of Russia’s spiritual space.”

The Mufti Council’s commitment to education goes back many decades. In 1998, Chairman of Russia Muftis Council mufti sheikh Ravil Gaynutdin approached the then president of Tatarstan Mintimer Shaimiev with the initiative of establishing Islamic higher education institution for training imams and Muslim religious scholars in Kazan – which became the Russian Islamic University (established by the Russia Muftis Council, Spiritual Administration of Muslims of the Republic of Tatarstan and Mardjani Institute of History of the Academy of Sciences of Tatarstan). Mufti sheikh Ravil Gaynutdin has called it the “leader of the system of Islamic education” noted: “During all these years, our university has nurtured and educated many young imams and religious scholars who nowadays serve our holy religion not only in Volga region, but in other parts of Russia as well.”

The expressed need to involve Muslim clergy in matters of the state is justified by an appeal to the threat of extremism and terrorism that threatens all Russian lives. In 2010 participants of the All-Russian Conference “The Muslim Clergy and Modern Challenges to Russia's Security” released a statement declaring that: “Today life itself dictates the Muslim clergy to participate in strengthening the state, to improve society and to form a unified Russian society and its identity” as “threats and challenges lie not only in socio-economic but also in ideological sphere and demand a set of measures of religious-ideological and socio-educational nature.” Thus, Muslim clergy are framed as integral players in the security apparatus against the threat of outside ideological influences and violence that could destabilize the state.

Mufti Ravil Gaynutdin has praised Putin for his support of the Muslim communities of Russia. He has noted that “Putin was the first leader who called Russia ‘Muslim country too,’” as “[n]o Tsar, no emperor, no general secretary of the communist party before him did so.” He has also commended Putin for acknowledging that “Islam always was one of the pillars of the Russian statehood” and calling Russia the “most reliable and trustworthy defender of the interests of Muslim faith” – “one of the pillars of the Islamic world.” The RMC says that it is the duty of Muslims, according to the words of the Prophet Muhammad, to respect the ruling authorities.

The RMC often reiterates how instrumental Muslims have been in Russian history and in the construction of the nation and the flourishing of Russian culture. In the Mufti’s framing of the contributions of Islam and Muslims to Russian history, Mufti Ravil suggests: “We can rightfully consider ourselves legal successors of not only USSR, Russian Empire, Moscow and Kievan Rus but also Volga Bulgaria, Golden Horde and the states of Caucasus dating back to the time of the companions of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).” The RMC frames the Muslims of Russia as integral to Russian history and culture – to the nation itself. In one statement, they note: “Russian Muslims, as before, in times of great historical turning points, were and are not just an

integral part of the unique Russian civilization, but its proven and reliable defenders. Without them, a large part of the population, it would be impossible to build this great civilization, a strong Russian state.” Like Putin, Mufti Ravil talks about a “Russian Islam” whose “spiritual roots” are connected to the “Eurasian fundamentals of Russian civilization and statehood.”

Islamic Claims to Human Rights and Diversity

Mufti Ravil believes Islam in Russia can serve as an example for the global ummah – the worldwide Islamic community.ⁱ According to the Mufti Council’s website:

Islam is without prejudice to any human rights and freedoms, but discrimination is often assigned to Islam by anti-Islamists. Islam, on the contrary, opposes only moral and spiritual corruption of a person, it cares about natural decrease of population, death from alcoholism and drugs, AIDS and other evil sides of “free” world: immorality and all-permissiveness.”

Mufti Ravil asserts that Islam affirms human rights, and frames Muslims as victims of human rights abuses, such as Islamophobia. As he explains: “We, Muslims of Russia are against xenophobia, extremism, terrorism and attempts to justify them religiously, these phenomena are alien to our religion, and we oppose antagonism based on politics, nationality and religion that introduces enmity among confessions and peoples.”ⁱⁱ He warns against *fitna* and racism by quoting a well-known hadith. He cautions: “Islam does not divide nations to better and worse. Our Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him and mercy) proclaimed: “Oh people! Isn’t your Lord single? Don’t you have the only father? Has an Arab advantage over non-Arab? Or has non-Arab advantage over an Arab? Or the black-skinned over white-skinned or vice versa? The advantage is only in fear of God and devotion.”ⁱⁱⁱ For him, the Muslim community and Mufti Council are helping to bring stability and build civil society.

The Mufti also quotes Qur'an to argue for peaceful coexistence between different communities. He notes: "For the overwhelming majority of Muslims all around the world the priority way is the way of multipolar world, the way of unity of the world society through mutual enrichment of confessional and national cultures. The Holy Quran cites: "Oh people! We created you as men and women and made you nations and tribes for you to cognize each other. Truly the most noble of you to Allah is the most pietistic. Allah, truly, is Knowing and Conversant" (49:13)." ^{iv}

The Mufti Council positions itself as being on the front lines of opposing interethnic conflict, international discord, and radicalism by "raising the level of religious education and training Muslim clergymen, introducing into Muslim ethnic cultural environment modern bases of religious and moral culture." ^v

Similar to Muftis in Central Asia, Mufti Ravil Gainutdin stresses that Islam in Russia should be shaped by reformist figures in its Tsarist history as opposed to missionary influences from outside of Russia's borders. In addition to appealing to the Qur'an and hadith, the Muslim Board references regional Muslim reformers of the past, such as the jadids. Mufti Ravil Gainutdin believes that one of the ways of opposing extremism is through religious education that is based on the moderate orientation of the Jadid reformers in the Russian lands in the 19th century. He explains:

It was particularly stressed that as one of the ways of opposing radicalism the Russian Mufti Council considers raising the level of religious education and training Muslim clergymen, and introducing into the Muslim ethnic and cultural environment modern notions of religious and moral culture. We want to spread through educational enterprises, mass media, and the message of spiritual leaders, the religious traditions and historical Islamic theological movements of Russia, the works of the great Tatar enlighteners at the turn of the XIX-XX centuries – Mardjani, Bigiev, Kamaledin, Gasprinskiy and other ideologists of Jadidism, who appealed for peace and love, tolerance and mutual respect. Russian Muslims are not in

need of importing other ideologies. Russian Islam develops when the educational level is high, and the citizens of the country as a whole, including Muslims, have a moderate character and can to a great extent be a model for the world ummah.”

The Mufti Council frequently appeals to Tsarist history, specifically to the jaded movement, to argue for an indigenous and modern brand of national Islam that can serve as an inspiration for Muslims both within and outside of Russia’s borders. As Ekmeleddin Mehmet İhsanoğlu, a Turkish politician and diplomat who was Secretary-General of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation from 2004 to 2014, noted during his visit to the Russian Muftis Council: “Russian Muslims are not in need of import of other ideologies...and can to a great extent be a model for the world ummah.”^{vi}

Structural Battles: Attempted Consolidations of Authority

While the dissolution of the Soviet Union greatly decentralized Muslim authority in Russia, there have been recent attempts to consolidate the multiple spiritual directorates which emerged after the fall of the Soviet Union. In 2009, there was a plan to unite all of Russia’s Muslim spiritual directorates (DUMs)^{vii} in a center called the Supreme Council of Muftis of Russia, which would include all the Muftis of Russia and be guided by a single mufti.^{viii} The Council would be concerned primarily with the ideological interests of sharia. Talgat Tajuddin^{ix}, who led the Central Spiritual Board of Muslims (TsDUM) at the time, had proposed the creation of a single Muslim board to be headed by his rival, the head of the Council of Muftis of Russia (Ravil Gainutdin). Tajuddin wanted to be named Sheikh ul-Islam, and proposed that Ismail Berdiyev, the head of Russia’s third major Muslim organization, the Coordinating Center of Muslims of the North Caucasus, become the head of the Supreme Shari’a Court. Their condition was that, when fatwas would be issued, the view of the North Caucasus would be taken into account as mandatory, and the North Caucasus would have

veto power. Despite the fact that the proposal to create a unified body for all of the Muslims of Russia had approval from many of the Muftis, the merger was not successful.

On December 7, Tajuddin decided not to take part in the December 11 session to prepare for unification. While Berdiyev had initially supported the merger, he noted that he “does not consider especially important the unification of the three leading Islamic structures of the country.”^{xx} The remaining muftis seized the opportunity to voice their own concerns. For instance, Gusman Iskhakov, the head of the Tatarstan DUM, said that “one should not proceed toward unification spontaneously and at any price; it is necessary to consider all aspects of the situation [in such a way that] no one involved will feel himself to be reduced [in status and preferment].”^{xxi} The Kremlin had originally signaled its support for the plan, yet if the plan had passed, the headquarters would have been in the capital^{xii} and exerted potentially more influence. Galimzhan Bimullin, the head of the Tyumen DUM, said that he would support the unification of the country’s Islamic structures, but believes that “the supreme mufti and the chief kazi and all the other leading positions of the structures of a Unified DUM of Russia should be chosen by a free vote of a general assembly of Muslims.” In the words of Ismail Byrd (the Mufti of Stavropol and KChR): “We are for the unification of all the Muslims of Russia, but the Coordinating Center does not have a claim to primacy.”^{xxiii} Thus, the main obstacle to unifying was determining who would occupy the leading positions in the hierarchy of the unified structures. While these directorates decided not to unify in 2009, they did meet in 2010 to discuss how to collaborate and unify their procedures and communities.

On February 3rd, 2010, the Council of Muftis of Russia sponsored the first meeting of a working group meeting to discuss whether the Islamic organizations in Russia should be united not in a single structure but rather to consolidate and coordinate existing centers for the benefit of Russia’s umma and the entire state. The Mufti of the North Caucasus said that he supported the

idea of creating a single advisory body. Deputy Chairman of CCMNC (the mufti of Kabardino-Balkaria) Pschihachev Anas said that the Muftiate of the Caucasus would like a Supreme Council of Muslims of Russia that “could create a thematic committee on education^{xiv} so that all of the Islamic universities could offer uniform educational standards and so on.” Rostov Mufti Jafar Bikmaev stated, “Many of the Mufti and the Mufti SMR at the time resigned from the TSDUM, and if they are ripe for unity, it can return to our organization – the doors are open. Let them come to us--in TSDUM, we have 220 years of our being!” The Chairman of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of the Perm region, Muhamedgali Khuzin commented: “The ummah itself should decide the question of unification, and in every region.” Thus, while the directorates have remained separate, there have been renewed calls in the past few years to find ways to coordinate the different Muslim directorates so that there are consistent standards in Islamic education, charity, and religious practice. In 2011, at the VII Muslim Forum, the RMC recommended the establishment of a Council of Muftis of the CIS and an Ulema Council of CIS “to consolidate and develop the traditional for Muslims the Commonwealth the Hanafi school, for the fight against extremism and radicalization among young people and on the politicization issues of Islam.” These Councils, however, did not materialize.

Political Cooperation: Foreign Policy and State Collaboration

The Mufti Council in Russia often directly comments upon political events both at home and abroad. Domestically, the website of the Russian Mufti Council announces that “a great amount of work is being done by the Russia Muftis Council aimed at strengthening the stability of our Russia, [and] building civil society.”^{xv} The Mufti Council does not hide its cooperation with the country’s authorities, such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs^{xvi} and Department of Defense, as well

as its meetings with foreign leaders like the Palestinian leaders of “ Hamas ” who visited Russia by invitation of President Vladimir Putin. The Mufti Council of Russia explicitly explains on their website their relationship with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Mufti Ravil Gainutdin, the head of the Council of Muftis of Russia, notes:

The Russian Mufti Council shares the efforts of our country’s authorities, the activities of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in their striving to a better integration of Russian Muslims into world Muslim society...The Russian Mufti Council’s activities and meetings that have taken place within the framework of “national diplomacy”, as happened in the form of summit meetings with state, social and religious leaders of Islamic world.^{xvii}

In 2009, the RMC participated in a meeting of Russian President Dmitry Medvedev about the importance of teaching morals and values in military institutions as well as schools. Mufti Ravil Gainutdin expressed the Council’s endorsement of the actions of the state in strengthening the national army and attempt to foster spiritual and moral values in the army. He said: “The messenger of Allah “peace be upon him and His mercy” said: ‘The Love for motherland is a principle of faith.’ The teachings of Islam itself inspires a Muslim to be a defender of his motherland.” He stressed that Russia’s Muslim religious organizations and Muslims “stand for integrality and unanimity of our state and support the efforts of the state aimed at strengthening of defense capability of the army, and strengthening of spiritual character of the military men” whose freedom of religion rights should be respected even though they are from “different nationalities” and religions.

The Russian Mufti Council notes that is aware that extremists often portray the Muftiate as being an extension of the state due to the suspicions of the relationship between the Muftiate and government during Communism. On their website, it states:

Even the fact that the Mufti who is specially educated and comes to bring religion – there are those who say that the Mufti at that time was sent by the Communists sent, or the KGB, and therefore that their protégé, they say, should not be listened to—that’s how it is presented to advocates of non-traditional Islam.

The website points out that “[i]t’s not a secret that both in Russian Empire and in the Soviet Union the role of the informal organizations and the ‘people’s diplomacy’ in the strengthening the influence of Russia in a particular region was highly esteemed.” Thus, the Mufti Council’s diplomacy is framed as from below not above^{xviii} and a continuation of a Soviet practice.

The Russian Mufti Council is transparent in their relationship to “national diplomacy” and their relationship to state leaders of the Islamic world. Mufti Ravil Gainutdin believes “the existing historical experience in Russia should be developed on the basis of modern geopolitical realities with use of social activity and patriotism of Russia Muslims.”^{xix} Thus, the Russian Muftis articulate their desire to be in alignment with Russian foreign policy and to act as diplomats to further the national interests of the state. As Mufti Ravil explains:

We are convinced that under the growing influence of the modern Islamic world on the global system of international relations, our state can and should use the potential of the Russian Muslims to triumph the love of peace and justice. And Russia’s Muslims are able to be a reliable bridge between Russia and the resurgent Islamic world, which contribute to free of conflict and constructive development.

In 2009, President Dmitry Medvedev awarded Mufti Sheikh Ravil Gaynutdin, chairman of Russia Muftis Council, chairman of the Religious board of Muslims of the European part of Russia with the Order “Of Merit for Country” of IV degree “for the significant contribution in the development of spiritual culture and strengthening of friendship among nations.” Rushan Abbasov, who has

served as the Deputy Chairman of the Russian Muftis Council and the RMC chief of staff, was postgraduate student of the Diplomatic Academy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation.

In addition to hosting foreign delegations from Muslim countries, the Russia Muftis Council has signed agreements of international cooperation that align with Russia's foreign policy goals. For instance, the Russian Mufti Council has partnered with the Ulema Council of Afghanistan to help to fight Afghan drug trafficking, distribution, and consumption. While this agreement on cooperation was signed by Russian Muftis Council head Ravil Gaynutdin and Deputy Minister for Hajj in the government of Afghanistan, Abdul Hakim Monib, it was made possible by the Russian ambassador in Kabul, Andrey Avetisyan, and President Hamid Karzai's advisers. The agreement was framed as a first step to making more permanent cooperation between "Islamic communities in Afghanistan and Russia" but of course coordinated by the state agencies of the Russian Federation and Afghanistan.

The cooperation between the Russian Muftis Council and Ministry of Foreign Affairs also extends to Quranic competitions. For the 2012 XIII Moscow International Quran recitation competition under the patronage of the Chairman of the Russian Muftis Council Mufti Sheikh Ravil Gaynutdin and supported by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the competitors were those who memorized the entire Quran (hafiz).^{xx} The event was attended by over 30 participants from Turkey, France, Kazakhstan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, the U.S., Indonesia, Tunisia, South Africa, China, Morocco, Barbados, Uganda, Senegal, Tanzania. The first time the Russian capital hosted the competition in 2000 in the Moscow Cathedral Mosque. In 2007, the contest has gained international status, the judging was composed from Hafiz and reciters of the Quran from Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Russia. In 2011, the best reciter on the Quran was found 28-year-old imam of the Al-Aksa Said Dawood from Palestine.

The Russia Muftis Council also helps put on the Kazan International Muslim Film Festival. For the VIII Kazan International Muslim Film Festival,^{xxi} Mufti Sheikh Ravil Gaynutdin said: “On behalf of the Russian Muftis Council, I am glad to welcome in the capital of Tatarstan participants and guests of the VIII Kazan International Muslim Film Festival, that gathered filmmakers from four sides of the world under the motto: Through a dialogue of cultures – to the culture of dialogue.” The film festival was intended to promote mutual understanding across borders. According to Mufti Ravil, movies can foster cultural, creative and constructive dialogue and tolerance.

Controversy: Apostasy Accusations and Consequences

One of the most significant intersections of the Muftiate and Russian foreign policy resulted in the dismissal of Chief Mufti, Talgat Tajuddin, from the Mufti Council of Russia. Talgat Tajuddin was declared an apostate from Islam at meeting which was attended by Muslim leaders of the Central Asian part of Russia, Northern Caucasus, Tatarstan, Bashkortostan republics and regions of Siberia, Volga and Ural regions. Talgat Tajuddin announced in Ufa on April 3rd, 2003 that God spoke through his mouth. The assembled Muftis decided that this was apostasy because his statement rejects one of the fundamental principles of Islam, under which Muhammad is the last prophet. They condemned his accusations that the Russian authorities, in particular the Prosecutor General of Russia, serve U.S. interests. The Council of Muftis adopted a final document and fatwa against Tajuddin for assigning himself the status of a prophet and trying to draw Russian into a conflict with the United States. On April 14, 2003, the Council adopted issued fatwa,^{xxii} which was signed by the Chairman of the Council of Muftis of Russia, Mufti Sheikh Ravil Gainutdin,^{xxiii} and emphasized that the actions of the Supreme Mufti “caused enormous damage to the credibility of Russian Muslim organizations and damaged the foreign policy of our state” while reassuring that

“the flexible foreign policy of our country, aimed at maintaining positive relations with both countries of the West and the Arab world, enjoys unwavering support of the Russian Ummah.” The Muslim leaders of Russia made explicit recommendations as to how to proceed with the matter, noting in the fatwa that they:

recognize that the activities of Talgat Tajuddin, who had assumed a prophetic position, departed from the fundamentals of Islam; declare that it is impossible for Talgat Tajuddin to hold the office of the spiritual leader of Muslim organizations in Russia; acknowledge that Talgat Tajuddin’s statement declaring jihad against the U.S. military does not have any theological or legal or moral force and does not subject Russian Muslims to execution; declare that henceforth no Muslims have the right to pray with Talgat Tajuddin or follow any instructions or advice from him; refute Tajuddin’s prediction that in the next two or three days one of the U.S. aircraft carriers will sink...[His] blasphemy is also an attempt to compare a jihad against the United States with the jihad against Nazi Germany, as Germany in 1941, treacherously violated the treaty, [and] attacked the Soviet Union, [whereas] no one has attacked Russia today.

This fatwa clearly articulates how the statements of the Supreme Mufti reflected poorly upon the whole Muslim community in Russia, for whom he was a representative, and illustrates the foreign policy disasters and religious debacles that can result when a Supreme Mufti makes statements about Russian foreign policy that are not in line with the platform of the state.

Controversy: Defending Hijab in Schools

In 2015, Russia’s Grand Mufti, Ravil Gainutdin, sent President Putin a letter defending the right of Muslim girls to wear the hijab in schools and universities as a sign of modesty not religious

affiliation or a challenge to society. He framed female modest dress as in line with the other Abrahamic religions. Putin had been clear as early as 2012 that hijabs should not be worn in schools as Russia is a secular state. On the Russian Mufti Council website, Gainutdin wrote in this open letter: “I address you as a mufti and as a father – please protect our traditional values, protect our daughters and granddaughters – the future of our great and beautiful Eurasian state.” He blamed foreign influences for the politicization of the hijab, and called the “headscarf issue” in foreign countries a sign of anti-democratic intolerance and disrespect to Eurasian traditions of inter-ethnic friendship. Putin himself had said in 2012 that he was taking cues from his European neighbors on this heated issue: “We should see how our neighbors, European states deal with this issue [wearing hijabs]. And everything will become clear.” In 2014, Russia’s Supreme Court banned the use of the hijab and other Muslim headwear in schools, after a complaint was filed in southern Russia’s Stavropol region. In protest, the RMC asked: “We want to understand, are we a secular democracy or an atheist state? Today they won't let us wear headscarves, tomorrow they might ban your baptismal cross.”

Controversy: Mosque Building, Media, and Education

The opening ceremony of Moscow Jum’ah Mosque was attended by President Vladimir Putin, President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev, President of the State of Palestine Mahmoud Abbas, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and other Muslim statesmen and religious officials. At the opening, President Putin paid respect to Moscow’s Muslim roots: “Moscow’s Muslim community, for example, emerged back in medieval times, and this is reflected in the Tatar roots of many of the capital’s street names.” He called traditional Islam an integral part of Russia’s spiritual life, noting: “Islam’s humanist values, like the values of our other traditional religions, teach

people compassion, justice and care for our loved ones. We place great value on these things.” He also referenced the Quran, noting: “The Koran tells us to try to outdo each other in doing good.” Putin asserted that the number of mosques in Russia has increased in the past two decades, such as in Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, and Chechnya.

The Mufti Council has repeatedly lamented the difficulties in getting land allocated for the construction of mosques in several regions of Russia. Despite the very public and impressive opening of Moscow’s Jum’ah Mosque, the Muftis have called for more mosque openings across the country. In a statement, the RMC stated:

The members of the Russian Mufti Council, representing the largest centralized Muslim organizations in the country, expressed serious concern that the provision of land to Muslim religious organizations for construction of mosques in Moscow faced serious obstacles due to the activities of certain informal social organizations, urging residents to oppose the construction of mosques in the capital of multi-religious and multi-national Russia.

The RMC has repeatedly asked the state and city of Moscow for more land to construct more mosques in Moscow. In their statement, they say that attempts to impede “the realization of the constitutional rights of Muslims to practice their religion, may negatively affect the state-confessional relations in our country and become a signal to the groundless decisions that prevent the allocation of land for construction of mosques in other parts of the Russian Federation.” In their appeal, they frame Moscow as a historic center of equality and tolerance, stating: “Moscow has always been an example of compliance with fair principles of equality of religions and nationalities. We hope that in future public policy in these areas will be strictly enforced, which will help to save the interfaith and interethnic accord in the Russian society.” The RMC laid blame for resistance to mosque building on the media.

When Deputy Chairman of Russia's Mufti Council Rushan Hazrat Abbyasov met with the members of U. S. Commission for International Religious Freedom,^{xxiv} he stressed the ongoing tendency of the mass media to conflate extremism with Islam in Russia and the West. He stated: "It is because of this policy that people both in Russia and in the West start fearing construction of new mosques, and it may even lead to misunderstanding from local authorities. Such a policy of mass media also affects public opinion on hijab, the recent ban of which in [Russian] schools is clearly a politically charged issue." Thus, he did mention the contentious issues of the wearing of hijab and building more mosques, as well as the ban of the translation of the Holy Qur'an into Russian language by secular philosophy professor Dr. Elmir Kuliev.

Friend or Foe: Historical Memory, Media, and Education

While the Muftis work closely with the media,^{xxv} another main demand for years was for an All-Russian Islamic educational TV channel, and the formation of a unified, multilevel system of religious education with qualified teachers. Muftis in Russia (such as Kamil Samigullin, mufti of the Tatarstan Republic) have called upon the media to not use sensationalized stories about Islam – they should instead provide more positive images of Islam. They have recommended the media call ISIS "the so-called Islamic state" to show the group is not in any way Islamic, and called upon government officials to incorporate verses from the Quran in their speeches as Putin did at the opening of the main mosque in Moscow. To combat negative perceptions, Muftis have also recommended religious leaders becoming more active on social media. In addition, the RMC has pointed out the hypocrisy of the media: "For many years in a row mass media regularly reminds of the destruction of Buddhas of Bamiyan in Afghanistan, portraying these events as the example of "aggressiveness" of Muslims, but at the same time keep silent about the ongoing violence and

genocide of Muslim population in Buddhist Burma.” Thus, they have critiqued the silence of the media on atrocities committed against Muslims.

The RMC has also asked that all “nations” and “religions” be included in commemorations of historical events and include war heroes and victims of repression from the Muslim communities too. Mufti Gaynutdin has called for the “restoration of historical truth” and noted that “history should be single.” In a speech, he quoted I. Ilyin: “As many nations Russia has received, the same amount she has saved,” to discuss the 160 nationalities living on the territory of the Russian Federation -- 38 of which ethnically and spiritually belong to Islamic civilization and culture. He also recited the 1913 poem “On the Russian land” by the great Tatar poet Gabdulla Tukay:

Not will fade our trace on the Russian land
 Reflect do we Russia as mirror-like glass
 For ages with Russians we cheered and lived
 Speech, habits and manners be witness to this
 We've long have with Russians relative become
 Will never the ages such ties dismiss
 Despite all the struggles we have been at one
 Through history strongly together been mixed
 As tigers in hardships of war we are brave
 As horses are hardworking in peaceful days
 For mercy and peace in this country beloved
 With all living nations we share the right.

He employed this rhetorical device of solidarity and unity to set up his concerns and criticisms of how Muslims are treated differently, such as the decade long fight to build a mosque for the Muslims of the Stavropol region, Sochi, and Kostroma is still unsolved. He warned: “The forces that pull forward a slogan ‘Russia is for Russians’ shatter the basis of our state and threaten the future of the country. If the authorities turn the blind eye on such facts, it is possible that tomorrow appear hotheads from among Muslims who will proclaim: ‘Volga region, Astrakhan region and Siberia for Tatars’ or ‘Chechnya for Chechens.’” He sounded the alarm about the rise of the xenophobic and chauvinistic mood in Russian society, the lack of trust between the rich and poor, and the prevalence of corruption among top level civil servants.

Further, the RMC has criticized the educational program “Bases of Orthodox Culture” as a violation of the Constitution for it imposes on the whole society the “ideas of superiority of one culture and one nation over the rest.” He believes this alienates Muslims, Jews, and Buddhists. Further, he cautions: “It is the discrepancy between the ideology and real life that has always resulted in great misfortunes in Russia: crush of czarist regime, the collapse of the USSR etc.” In his speech, he called for a special department or ministry to deal in nationalities’ matters.

One of the main differences between fatwas in Russia and Central Asia is the fact that the media in Russia is attacked quite frequently in many fatwas from the region, whereas this is not the case in Central Asia. Mufti Alyautdinov claims that “Russia’s mass media for many years (about 10 years) has exhibited very strange behavior, constantly denigrating Islam and humiliating Russian Muslims.” He repeatedly charges that the media practices “information terrorism” through intimidation and the dissemination of fear.^{xxvi} He calls this “the gravest form of social crime.” One man, named Hamid, in a letter to Mufti Alyautdinov, singles out the newspaper “Komsomolskaya Pravda” for media bias and for trying to provoke tensions between Muslims and non-Muslims. He writes to the imam: “These nationalist sentiments are sometimes quite frightening!...Incompetent

and uneducated reporters write disgusting fiction! I am a Muslim, a native Muscovite, but all these articles in local media make me so sick that I am simply ashamed for being such ‘a genuine Russian patriot.’” Similarly, Mufti Ravil Gaynutdin, boldly suggests that terrorism is not the only threat facing the nation as forces within the state may prove just as harmful. He asserts:

Today many words are said about a threat to Russia ’s sovereignty, implying international terrorism that allegedly threatens integrity of the state. Perhaps there is element of truth in it. But we, Muslims, do feel the approach of another danger – the main challenges to the country’s sovereignty are inside the country: don’t we notice the rise of xenophobic and chauvinistic mood in the society, don’t we witness the crisis of trust among different layers of society, between rich and poor, hasn’t corruption become an infectious disease among top civil servants, a part of ruling class?”

While he is expressing concern for the integrity of the state, he is simultaneously critiquing problems plaguing the nation, which is different from fatwas from Central Asia which frame only terrorism as a threat to the state as opposed to other concerns such as economic disparity and corruption.

Controversy: Banning Religious Literature

Bans on Islamic literature in Russia have included classical works by medieval Muslim theologians, Quran translations, and well-known classics of Tatar theology. Despite the fact that the RMC created an expert council in 2003 to evaluate Muslim literature and flag any texts that could

encourage or be misinterpreted as extremist, their efforts and opinions have not stopped courts from banning Islamic literature that is not considered extremist outside of Russia's borders.

The Mufti Council strongly criticized and eventually appealed a 2012 decision of a Buguruslan court in the Leninsky Orenburg region that declared several religious books extremist. In September 2013, the court of Oktyabrsky district of Novorossiysk ruled that the 2002 Russian translation of the Holy Qur'an by Elmir Kuliev (a "logical successor of a reputable academic translation of Ignaty Krachkovsky") was "extremist." The Council found this judgment "even more blasphemous than the last year's ruling of Leninsky district court of Orenburg."^{xxxvii}

When a book is deemed "extremist," all copies of it are to be destroyed. Following these cases, the Apastovo regional court of Tatarstan declared "extremist" the 52nd book of the hadith collection of Imam al-Bukhari, one of the six main medieval hadith collectors (the Russian translation of Vladimir Nirsha was published in 2002 / 2003). The charges against the book were that it "advocates the exceptionalism" of a religion, promotes "militant Islam," and "incites national, religious hatred."^{xxxviii}

The RMC found these decisions to be a "gross violation of the Constitution of Russian Federation and international laws on freedom of conscience and worship" that "ruins Muslims' confidence in Russian laws and justice system and, ultimately, in the objectivity of Russian authorities." They repeatedly called upon Russian authorities to stop the "disgraceful practice of banning Muslim religious literature." Mufti Ravil Gaynutdin insisted that the RMC lawyers would work on an appeal to such cases, since "a book itself can't be a defendant and can't protect itself." During VI Majlis Congress of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of European Russia in 2014, Mufti Ravil Gaynutdin stated:

The banned books absolutely don't deserve it. They are classical theological works. We hold it that believers, especially those without knowledge of the very basics of Islam should be

protected from extremist sectarian literature. But the right to declare what's harmful and bad and what's good and useful must rest not in ignorant Islamophobes who aren't even familiar with Arabic script but universally recognised specialists in the field of Islam, such as Mikhail Piotrovsky, Vitaly Naumkin, Mikhail Meier, Dmitry Frolov, Said Kamilev, Aydar Khabutdinov and others.”

To prevent such cases in the future, he vowed that the RMC would create its own theological expert council that will “demand that the authorities recognize the decisions of the council on different questions.” The RMC challenged the bans in court.

In 2015, the Orenburg regional court reheard the case that banned 68 Islamic books, including 40 hadith of Imam an-Nawawi, biography of Prophet Muhammad by Sheikh al-Mubarakfuri, and a number of other well-known works of Islamic scholars who have never been accused in radicalism before. The appeal filed on behalf of Shamil Alyautdinov and publishing houses “Novy Svet” and “Dilya” was successful, with 50 of the 68 previously banned books taken off of the banned books list. The court also accused Judge Nuzhdin who issued the original ruling of a serious violation of the common law practice.

The RMC has expressed its view that such bans undermine its efforts and jeopardize their good relationships with the authorities. As they explain:

We urge to pay attention to the process of the ban Muslim educational publications and literature not always justified. We believe that the issue should be approached more carefully and deliberately, as hasty decisions often undermine the extensive efforts of central Religious Board of Muslims in the educational sphere, their cooperation with the authorities and the public in the revival of traditional Muslim values existed for centuries on Russian land and combating intolerance based on religion.

The banning of Islamic texts and the politicization of the hijab have been the two most heated points of contention between the RMC and authorities. The RMC has signaled that their allegiance is not unconditional and that the banning of foundational texts threatens their cooperation with the state and security apparatuses.

Controversy: Unlawful Searches and Seizures

The Mufti Council also interceded when Muslim communities of the cities of Yakhroma and Domodedovo in Moscow region were visited by security officers who asked to see identification from the congregation before Friday prayer and took some worshippers to the nearest office of the Directorate of Internal Affairs despite their Russian passports having valid registration. Further, the Chairman of Russia Muftis Council met with the acting Head of Crimea Sergey Aksyonov to discuss the legal validity of searches in the houses of local Crimean Tatar Muslims. Mufti sheikh Ravil Gaynutdin said: "I am sure that the errors will be corrected and those who committed this misconduct will present their apologies to the Spiritual Administration and those who became subject to such treatment." Regarding such practices, the RMC stated:

We believe the detention practices, and even arrest people just because of their religious beliefs, when their public conduct does not harm others and does not violate the laws of the Russian Federation is inappropriate and runs counter to the Russian Constitution and the Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations.

The Russia Muftis Council also criticized the police visit on June 25, 2013 to the house of the Chairman of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Penza Oblast and member of Russia Muftis Council Islam Dashkin, whose belongings were searched and confiscated without a search warrant. Similarly, the Mozhaysk rayon and police detained Muslims and stopped the attempted Friday prayer

with Rushan hazrat Abbyasov, the Chairman of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Moscow Oblast and member of the Civic Chamber of Moscow Oblast. All those in attendance had their IDs checked and were detained without reason at the local Department of Internal Affairs and held there until Rushan hazrat Abbyasov left the event. The RMC challenged the legality of the actions of the police.

Controversy: Migrant Rights and Justice

The Muftis Council called for a thorough and objective investigation of a murder of migrant worker from Uzbekistan in Kaluga Oblast in the city of Balabanovo who was attacked by a group of young people while at work in a bakery. He also proposed that a representative of Kaluga authorities visit the Muslim community of Maloyaroslavets to speak with members of the migrant community about the murder and violence against Muslim migrants. In the words of Mufti Ravil:

From our side we do everything possible to adapt the migrants, migrant workers, who are in Russia, among them the Kyrgyz and Tajiks and Uzbeks. We support them in legal terms, and spiritually. We hold common holidays, so that we can feel the unity that those who are far from their homeland, do not fall into extremist organizations, so that they won't not bring radical ideas either to Kyrgyzstan or in Uzbekistan or Tajikistan. We strive to ensure that migrants have the true knowledge that they have maintained their own native madhhab.

In his pledged support for migrants, the Mufti suggests they are susceptible to spreading radical ideas in Russia and back at home in Central Asia.

Controversy: An Independent and Official Chechnya Fatwa

When Chechen Republic head Ramzan Kadyrov gathered Islamic scholars in Grozny to discuss how to stop extremism and establish the criteria for determining who is a true follower of the Sunna (the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad), the group issued a fatwa that defined true believers as those who follow Islamic theology, belong to one of the four madhhabs (schools of jurisprudence), and follow the path of moral self-perfection and cultivation of virtue as taught by great spiritual masters, i.e. Sufi sheikhs. The group declared the Salafi interpretation of Sunni Islam as practiced in Saudi Arabia to be "dangerous and erroneous contemporary sect," on par with the Islamic State, Hizb ut-Tahrir, and the Habashis. The group also issued one document to ask President Putin to ban Salafism and brand any criticism of "traditional Islam" as extremism. A second document called for the foundation of a Council for Islamic Education and a Council of Ulema to help determine who is a true follower of Sunni Islam. They also suggested that the Council of Experts under the Federal Ministry of Justice be expanded to give a more fair process to what religious texts are deemed extremist. This gathering was not attended by the Russian Muftis Council, The Muslim Spiritual Boards of Daghestan and North Ossetia, or Russia's Central Spiritual Board.^{xxix}

FGM in Dagestan

After Dagestan cleric Ismail Berdiyev, chair of the North Caucasus Muslim Coordination Centre, stated that FGM was being practiced in some communities in the region as a solution to an apparently rampant problem of promiscuity in the area, Russia's Ministry of Health and Russia's chief Mufti condemned the enforcement of FGM on women in Dagestan. However Moscow's top Muslim cleric left some leeway, saying that while unnecessary, FGM was not banned under Islamic law. Berdiyev had said: "Women's sexuality needs to be reduced. It would be good if all women were cut. The Almighty created woman to give birth to children and bring them up. And [FGM] doesn't affect that. It doesn't stop women giving birth. And there would be less immorality."

In fact, his comments were initially endorsed by Vsevolod Chaplin, an Orthodox Christian leader, who stated on Facebook that traditional practices should be allowed to continue without interference and urged Berdiyev not to back down “despite the wailing and hysterics that will soon start.” He later retracted his comments. Berdiyev came under pressure and chalked his comments up to a joke, while reiterating that “depravity was a problem about which something had to be done.”

Controversy: Islamophobia

The presence of a noted Islamophobe at public hearings was interpreted by the Muftis Council and others as a sign of disrespect towards the country’s Muslims. A well-known translator of the Quranic message into Russian, Iman Valeria Porokhova walked out of the session of the Public Chamber of the Russian Federation devoted to the issue of the wearing of the hijab in schools to protest the presence of Roman Silantyev, “a foe of Muslims, with an ever-aggressive attitude towards Islam, and Albir Krganov. SAM RF deputy chairman Damir Muhetdinov who arrived there to convey the position of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of the Russian Federation and Russia Muftis Council, left the session ahead of schedule to protest as well.

Islamic Mysticism and Folk Traditions

The Russian Mufti Council looks favorably upon Sufism, as do the Muftis in Central Asia who have been promoting Sufism as a way to prevent extremism. RMC representatives (RMC deputy chairman Rushan Hazrat Abbyasov delivered remarks from Ravil Gaynutdin) attended the international conference on Sufism in Chechen Republic organized by the Spiritual Administration

of Muslims of the Chechen Republic, where Sufism has been promoted as an antidote to Wahhabism and extremism. The Mufti of Moscow, Mufti Alyautdinov, responding to a question as to whether Sufism is innovation or polytheism, explains:

Sufism is a desire to worship God consciously. It is the improvement of one's moral qualities, when one tries to understand oneself in the context of eternity, and to create within and around oneself an atmosphere of faith and religious practice. Tasawwuf [Sufism] is definitely not polytheism. Such an assumption is a very wrong misconception."

The Mufti of Russia astutely notes that today the word "Sufism" is often associated with something mystical and mysterious, rather than having to do with moral growth and spiritual development. He wisely attributes this misunderstanding to "Orientalist interpretations of the term." He explains Sufism as a combination of ascetic practices which are used to gradually cultivate a mystical love of the knowledge of God and merge with God through following the "voice of the heart."^{xxx} In his fatwa, he declares that "one can say in good conscience that Sufism [tasawwuf] originated precisely in the fundamentals and teachings of Islam, and it derives from the Qur'an, authentic hadith, and the behavior and words of the Prophet (*saw*)."^{xxx} He celebrates Sufism for its focus on mutual respect and love of people to each other and its ability to soften the heart.

Mufti Ravil Gaynutdin and the Russian Mufti Council have endorsed the celebration of Mawlid an-Nabi,^{xxxii} the birth of the Prophet Muhammad, which the Mufti has called "a day of joy, grace and hope for the believers." This occasion is contested by Muslims who tend to be followers of Wahhabism or Salafism. According to Mufti Gaynutdin, the most pious act during all the days of celebrating the birth of the Prophet Muhammad would be a visit to the Prophet's grave Medina to pray at his mosque. Mufti Gaynutdin advises: "In the month of Mawlid a great blessing is reading, listening, presentation of miraculous events of that night in which our Prophet was born." He

stresses the necessity of a sincere intention (*niyat*) in celebrating the Prophet's birth and of releasing one's self and world preoccupations. Mufti of Moscow Ildar hazrat Alyautdinov met with the famous nasheed performer Maher Zain who performed a festive program, "Mawlid an-Nabi: A Dialogue with Soul," in Moscow devoted to the birthday of Prophet Muhammad (attended by the Head of the Chechen Republic Ramzan Kadyrov and the President of the Republic of Tatarstan Rustam Minnikhanov).^{xxxii}

The Muftis in Russia, like those in Central Asia, have voiced concerns about whether or not certain folk traditions and cultural customs are in alignment with Islamic law. For instance, Muftis in Russia, similar to those in Central Asia, have criticized the ways in which funeral and memorial ceremonies are conducted. Mufti of Karachay-Cherkessia and Stavropol Territory and the chairman of the North Caucasus Coordinating Council of Muslims, Ismail Haji Berdiyev, in his discussion about why unification of the Muftiates would be a positive endeavor, specifically spoke about the need to clarify shariah laws on funerary rites. He explains:

There are rituals that are presented to the public as the shariah, but we are struggling with this and say that this is not the shariah and their performance is not necessary. So, for example -- funeral and memorial ceremonies. Here, people visit the cemetery the first three days after the funeral...we say that going to the cemetery for the dead on the third day is not necessary and has not been commanded by God. It is not the Shariah and the fact that we mark the 3rd, 7th and 52nd day with a memorial rite is only a custom...And that is why we do not want Shariah equated with customs.^{xxxiii}

The deliberation as to whether or not cultural customs conform to Islamic law has also been extended to whether folk traditions such as fortune telling are halal or haram. One woman writes to Mufti Alyautdinov that she encountered a woman who could tell people's fortunes from coffee

grinds and even predicted her own tooth and ovarian cysts—as well as revealed that her fiancé already had a child and secret son.^{xxxiv} Mufti Alyautdinov responds:

Knowing the past and the present is not too difficult for certain people connected with the *jinn*. Communicating with them is extremely dangerous and canonically forbidden...There is a clear and intelligible danger from penetrating into the information field of the future.^{xxxv}

Conversely, when Mufti Alyautdinov is asked whether or not “mental, neuropsychiatric diseases are caused by the devil or jinn,^{xxxvi}” he replies: “This is an unacceptable allegation--this is a superficial and incorrect conclusion.”^{xxxvii} Thus, Mufti Alyautdinov legislates which phenomena are influenced by and controlled by *jinn* and which are not.

Framing Soviet History in Islamic Law

Shamil Alyautdinov, the imam of Moscow’s Memorial Mosque and deputy mufti on the Clerical Muslim Board for the European part of the Russian Federation, comments upon the history of Soviet atheism and Orientalism in one of his online fatwas. In response to a question as to whether or not Islamic Philosophy is based upon the philosophy of Aristotle and Plato, Mufti Alyautdinov^{xxxviii}) responds: “There is such a thing as “Islamic philosophy,” but the attribution of it to European philosophy was an idea impregnated by Soviet atheism and is far from the truth.”

Mufti Alyautdinov discusses the relationship of Muslims to the history of war in Russia, similar to the fatwa above that frames the defense of Russia against Nazi attack as a *jihad*. A person online asks the him why “those Muslims who were killed defending their homeland, in the First and Second World Wars have been forgotten.” The Mufti explains:

My grandfather, for instance, defended Moscow against enemy aircraft, for which he subsequently was awarded orders and medals. His brother fought at Stalingrad. But for some reason the media is silent about it. On television now we hear: 'Islamic terrorists', 'Islamic extremists'... In my opinion, there is no country in the world with such a large-scale information war of terror and mass deception of the population.

In this fatwa, Mufti Alyautdinov comments about the history of Muslims fighting for the Soviet state and simultaneously attacks the media. In fact, the Mufti Alyautdinov, when defining *jihad*, uses WWII as an example of *jihad*. According to him, this is the true meaning of *jihad* is the following:

In times of peace, *jihad* is incorruptible diligence and perseverance for what is good, for the benefit of society (which in today's Russia is very lacking). In times of war, *jihad* is to defend one's own homeland (where there are no political, financial, personal or emotional interests). An example of this is the protection of our homeland from Nazi occupation during the Second World War.”

Thus there is a strong desire for recognition of the Muslims who fought in the “*jihad*” against the Nazis. He advises Muslims “not to succumb to a sense of inferiority” for “we are in his native land that our forefathers have always cultivated, in which they were born and lived and which has been defended by the best sons of Muslim peoples.” Russian President Vladimir Putin on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the Victory in the Great Patriotic War sent his greetings: “We must carefully cherish the memory of our fathers and grandfathers who defended the freedom and independence of our homeland, who returned the humanity to peaceful life again. And we must pass this historical truth to our children and grandchildren.”

Interreligious Relations: Missionaries, Conversion and Tolerance

The Russian Mufti Council has engaged in dialogue and cooperation between religions as well as to prevent extremism on religious and national bases. These include conferences with Christian and Jewish groups (2005 – 2006), the World Summit of Religious Leaders (July 2006), and cooperation within the Interreligious Council. There are many fatwas from the Russian Federation that address relations between Muslims and non-Muslims. Mufti Ravil Gaynutdin has written extensively on the importance of cooperation and respect between Muslims and Christians. He observes:

For many centuries Muslims and Christians have lived as kind neighbors, sharing the hardships and joys of their Motherland...In modern Russia, the symbol of tolerance and at the same time the multinationality and multiconfessionality of our state, is the Kazan Kremlin where two majestic religious buildings are situated – the Mosque Kul Sharif and Blagoveshenskiy Cathedral. But it should be noted that the situation is not as clear everywhere. For more than 10 years, we have been striving to return a Muslim mosque to the Muslims of the Stavropol region, for building a mosque in Sochi. [Also], the problem around building a mosque in Kostroma is still unsolved. Muslims in the Caucasus helped to build...18 new Orthodox Churches in the region. It would be fair if our [Christian] brothers at the same time helped Muslims.

One man online mentions to the mufti of Moscow, Mufti Ildar Hazrat Alyautdinov, (who sits on the Council of Muftis of Russia) that he found a fatwa on another website that says one should not be friends with “infidels”^{xxxix}, yet Mufti Alyautdinov stresses “the fraternal bond” between all people and the necessity for “universal kinship,” which is not surprising as the Russian Muftiate is heavily engaged in interfaith work and cooperation.^{xl} However, in June 2009, Dagestani legal scholars^{xli}

issued a fatwa strongly advising Muslim men against marrying Christian or Jewish women, citing the canonical department of Russia's Central Spiritual Governance for Muslims.^{xlii}

Fatwas from Russia also try to tackle the ubiquitous presence of missionaries—both Christian and Muslim. When asked about the Pakistani (daavat-Tabligh) *dawa* spreading throughout the territory of the CIS, Mufti Alyautdinov states:

This is neither good nor bad...The question is -- how methods which were born in the specific conditions of Pakistan, where Islam is the state religion, can be successfully implemented in a secular Russia, where a Christian majority is dominant, as well as countries formed from the former Soviet Union?

Many fatwas on the issue of conversion revolve around those who have one Muslim parent and one Russian Orthodox parent. In one example, a Christian man whose late grandfather was Muslim and an Azeri from Tabriz desires to know how “to remember him [his grandfather] in the mosque, as is done in the Orthodox Church”^{xliii} even though his grandfather “might have violated any laws of Islam” because he married a Christian woman, and “his children were baptized.” Many of the questions to the imams and Muftis in this region talk about whether or not one should reveal to one's parents, relatives, and friends that they have converted to Islam.

While Mufti Ravil Gaynutdin makes many claims about the harmony between Christians and Muslims in Russia, he also attacks the Russian Federation for its promotion of Orthodoxy in the lives of those who are not Orthodox Christians. He writes:

A violation of the Constitution of our state in 74 regions of the Russian Federation is the introduction into educational school programs is the curriculum called “Foundations of Orthodox culture.” And the statement that each citizen of our country should know the Orthodox culture and Orthodox history of Russia is imposing on the whole society ideas of

superiority of one culture and one nation over the rest...It is the discrepancy between ideology and real life that has always resulted in great misfortunes in Russia: the crush of czarist regime, the collapse of the USSR, etc.

The disapproval of the Mufti of the school curriculum shows that the Muftiate is permitted to critique and criticize the policies of the state, even though the Muftis often agree with the authorities on issues of foreign policy. In addition to Russian Orthodoxy, there are also fatwas on Buddhism and Shintoism^{xliv} which are not found in fatwas from the Middle East and rarely found in fatwas from Central Asia.

Fatwas: Adjudicating Nationality and Language

Fatwas in Russia, similar to those in Central Asia, are preoccupied with questions of nationality and language. Mufti Ravil Gaynutdin writes about the need for unity even though Russia is home to so many different nationalities. He notes, “The fact that we are different shouldn’t be an obstacle to the service for the benefit of the motherland. The love for Motherland should unite people, not separate them.” Mufti Gaynutdin says that in addition to being “against xenophobia, extremism, terrorism and attempts to justify them religiously,” Muslims in Russia also “oppose antagonism based on politics, nationality and religion that introduces enmity among confessions and peoples.” In his fatwas, Mufti Gaynutdin attempts to posit that extremism occurs not just a religious basis but also from a national standpoint. He explains:

The forces that put forward a slogan “Russia is for Russians” shatter the basis of our state and threaten the future of the country. If authorities turn a blind eye on such acts, it is possible that tomorrow hotheads from among Muslims will appear and proclaim: “Volga

region, Astrakhan region and Siberia for 'Tatars' or "Chechnya for Chechens". Do we and our people need such scenes? I'm sure – we do not! We, the Russia Muftis Council and our Religious boards, on our part, do a lot in order to develop dialogue and cooperation between religions as well as to prevent extremism on a religious and national basis.

Preoccupations with nationality and ethnicity are mirrored in questions and fatwas about language, which is similar to fatwas from Central Asia. One person asks Mufti Alyautdinov if it is possible to make *du'a* in Russian, "even if you know your native language."^{xlv} A convert from Russia named Katya, who comes from a devout Christian family, writes to the Mufti: "each time before going to bed I pray – but in the Russian language." In a fatwa against male masturbation, or "secret habit," the Mufti of Russia uses the Arabic word for masturbation^{xlvi} instead of the Russian word "so as not to injure anyone's ears."

Condemning Terrorism and Extremism

Similar to Central Asia, there are many fatwas from the Russian Federation on terrorism, foreign invasion and occupation. In their fatwas, the Russian Mufti Council frequently invokes a verse from the Quran that says the murder of one innocent person equals to the murder of all the humankind: "The one who kills a soul not for a soul and now for a crime he is like the killer of all the humankind" (Quran, 5:32). One Muslim asks Mufti Alyautdinov: "How can [terrorists] call themselves Muslims and swear by the name of Allah? I do not understand because Islam calls for good--not for killing people." Mufti Alyautdinov responds: "Murderers and those who stand behind them, have neither nationality nor religion...At this point in history everyone blames Muslims, as the latter cannot properly defend themselves against information terrorism, and must humbly rely on

the will of the Creator.” The Russia Mufti Council in general has issues numerous pronouncements against terrorism and extremism.

The Muftis in Russia have repeatedly come out strongly against suicide bombings and terrorism. At a Council of the Muftis of Russia, held after a suicide bombing attack in the Moscow metro in 2010, the Muftis declared that a terrorist cannot be Muslim and a Muslim cannot be a terrorist. The website of the Muftiate describes their position:

The Chairman of the Council of the Muftis of Russia, Mufti Sheikh Ravil Gainutdin, has been forced to explain that such a term (the word *shahid* [martyr] is highly revered by Muslims) is used for people who died in a just war with aggressors in the name of defending Islam. We once again affirm: a suicide bomber cannot be a Muslim and a Muslim cannot be a terrorist. Extremism and terrorism have no support in the Holy Quran and the Sunnah of the Prophet (S.A.V.)...The Council of the Muftis of Russia has repeatedly advocated an official ban on reporting the ethnic and religious identity of the violators of the law.^{xxlvii}

While the fatwa denounces terrorism, it also criticizes the tendency in the media to label terrorists as religious extremists instead of seeing their motivations as something completely different from religion, since, in their opinion, the religion of Islam does not condone such violence. The Mufti of Stavropol and Karachay-Cherkessia and chairman of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims (DUM), Ismail Haji Berdiyev, published a fatwa on suicide bombers and even compared the wandering soul of a suicide bomber to the mummified soul-less body of Lenin. He explains:

Religion and politics have to be separated...People become zombies so that they can become living bombs ready to explode. But that is nowhere in the religion. A man who commits suicide, according to the religion, will burn forever in flames...God gave you life,

and he alone has the right to take it away from you. The same applies to the burial rights after one's death. The body must be buried soon after, as God takes the man's soul. And while the body on the ground it will not find a place - the soul suffers. This is a real-life example: the body of Vladimir Lenin, who invented atheism, still lies in a mausoleum, and his soul is tormented, because the body is not buried, and will continue to suffer as much until someone figures out that because his body was not given to the ground, his soul is not appeased.

Muhammad Sadiq Yusuf, one of the most authoritative Muslim scholars in the post-Soviet Islamic landscape who was once Grand Mufti of the Muslim Spiritual Administration of Central Asia and the first Mufti of Uzbekistan after independence, remained one of the most authoritative voices on Islam in the former Soviet Union. In March 2010, he received media coverage for his public condemnation of the Moscow suicides attacks that took place on March 30th 2010. He stated: "Our religion does not tolerate terror and killing of innocent people. Even during war, Islam strictly prohibits the killing of old men, women, children, and civilians. Today, we along with the whole Russian people mourn the dead and injured and give condolences to the families and friends of the victims of this crime." Even though he is from Uzbekistan, his denunciation of the terrorists attacks in Russia were carried throughout media outlets in Russia and Central Asia.

Many fatwas from the Russian Federation are devoted to refuting Hizb ut-Tahrir. When asked about Hizb ut-Tahrir, the Mufti Alyautdinov writes: "you can not say anything good about this party." A student explains his involvement with Hizb ut-Tahrir to the Mufti. He recounts: "I had to meet with representatives of Hizb-ut-Tahrir. They tried to make me take part. Recently, I was summoned to the *FSB*^{xlviii} for questioning ... How should I be?" Mufti Alyautdinov responds:

It is better to be smarter in choosing companions and friends. As I understand it, you're still very young, so try not to spoil your life with silly nonsense. Educate yourself...If someone says that he will build 'a paradise on earth', or that only he is right, then keep from him as far as possible...Do not participate in the activities of dubious political parties who use religious slogans. Be yourself, think about being successful in school, how to help your parents, to study the basics of Islam, and to be able to distinguish the true from the false.

Similarly, much of the discourse on extremism is focused on Salafi and Wahhabi influence. Russian Muftis point out that people who are swayed by Salafi and Wahhabi trends tend to be young and from socially disadvantaged groups. In addition, Muftis point out that extremists wield power of influence because of the lack of education about Islam, because: "in Soviet times people did not talk about that a man should have faith, and what it should be."

War, Occupation, and Contested Territories

Russian fatwas, unlike those from Central Asia, explicitly discuss events in South Ossetia, Iraq, Afghanistan, Palestine and Chechnya. As Mufti Ravil notes: "The Russian Muslims with pain and concern see the bloody events in Syria, the war-torn of Muslims against Muslims, for the continuing violation of the rights of the Palestinian people, with the worst of atrocities against Muslims in Myanmar." Online a Muslim asked the Mufti of Moscow, Mufti Alyautdinov, the following: "How do you feel about what is happening in the Muslim world, namely in the Chechen Republic, Iraq and Palestine? What is the way out?"^{xlix} The Mufti responds: "Build bridges of understanding and pray!" While Mufti Alyautdinov is in favor of building bridges to those who invade other countries (after they have exited), he does openly criticize the US invasion of Iraq. He declares:

The entire civilized world made a protest against another illegal and predatory invasion, but geopolitically industry-centered financial and power interests, did not hear these cries. Can a military invasion and mass murder, along with the impoverishment of millions of people be called fair? Even for the illiterate it is clear that five Americas would not be able to put things in order there.

He also criticizes America and the Soviet Union for their involvement in Afghanistan, and believes that “America^l and the Soviet Union played a cruel joke with them [the Taliban] and their leaders sold their people/nation (or were forced to sell).” As for the Taliban^{li}, Mufti Alyautdinov states: “there is no doubting the fact that they are historically and intellectually behind for a hundred years.”^{lii}

In 2008, the Chairman of the Central Muslim Board of Russia, Supreme Mufti, Talgat Tajuddin addressed regional Muslim boards and the Muslim community, appealing for them to render necessary help and support to the people of South Ossetia. The Supreme Mufti of Russia also called on the whole Muslim world to recognize independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. He stated:

Russian Muslims, like all our compatriots, support the decision of the Russian President Dmitry Medvedev on recognizing the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, for which the peoples of these republics have long suffered, and we call on the world community and the Islamic world to recognize the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia for the sake of peace and stability in the Caucasus...In fact, a genocide of a whole nation was performed.^{liii}

The RMC pointed out that the countries of the Muslim world were the first who condemned the military aggression against the South Ossetia started by Georgia.

As for the war in Syria, the RMC has supported peaceful dialogue and resolution. Mufti Ravil stated at the XIV Moscow International Qur'an Reciting Competition:^{liv} "Muslims of Russia fully share the position and moves of Russian leadership in this matter. We thank President Vladimir Putin and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russian Federation for their peace efforts and their concernment over the fates of Muslims and their Christian brothers in Syria." The mufti reminded the audience that according to the Qur'an and ahadith, "murder of a single man equals the murder of all humankind".

The Russian Mufti Council has repeatedly expressed "their solidarity with the long-suffering people of Palestine," noting that "Russia's Muslims have supported Palestinian cause since Soviet times." The Council has called for an independent nation for Palestine with its capital in Jerusalem. The Council notes that in Jerusalem "Muslims have to run the gauntlet through armed Israeli soldiers if they want to visit al-Aqsa or other mosques and holy sites" and "year after year, Israeli military kills Palestinian civilians—women, old people and kids alike." Israelis, the Council claims, "are aided in this quest by pro-Western media that tries to whitewash Israeli leadership."

The head of Russia's Mufti Council, Ravil Gainutdin, has in the past called for "mutual help and cooperation" with Hamas, according to the Council's website. At a meeting with the Chairman of Hamas political bureau Khaled Mashal, he said, "The Muslims of Russia take the situation in Palestine with a sore heart. We speak out to condemn the policy of Israel aimed at expanding the occupation of Palestinian land."^{lv} A delegation from Hamas visited Russia on the invitation of Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. Speaking at the meeting, the head of the Hamas delegation called the Russian Mufti Council the "second home" for him and his associates. "Every time we come to Russia, a visit to the Mufti Council is an essential part of our program."^{lvi}

Muftis Across Borders: Central Asian Ulema Cooperation

Meetings between religious and spiritual leaders from the former Soviet Union began as early as 2000.^{lviii} For instance, religious leaders from the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe gathered for a world peace summit in New York on August 28, 2000 for the Millennium World Peace Summit.^{lviii} More recently, Bulat Sultanov, the director of Kazakhstani Institute for Strategic Research, chaired a session on “Secularism and Islam in the Joint State: What Unites them?” at the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Forum that was moderated by Mufti of Kazakhstan Absattar Haji Derbisali, Dr. Sukhrob Sharipov (director of the Center for Strategic Studies under the President of Tajikistan,) and Dr. Arne Seifert, a diplomat from Germany.^{lix} In addition, the Russia Muftis Council and Cbonds Information Agency, the leading information resource covering fixed income markets in Russian and the CIS, sponsored an international conference on the “Development of Islamic Finance in the CIS” in Almaty on March 11, 2010 to foster the development of Islamic finance in the region and was attended by representatives from Kazakhstan, Russia, other CIS countries, the Middle East and Asia.^{lx} Thus, the countries of Central Asia and Russia have been recently engaging in a number of educational and religious exchanges, and addressing specific issues like Islamic finance, secularism, and the relationship between Islam and the state.

Former Russian President Vladimir Putin stressed the necessity of maintaining contacts between Muslims in Russia and Central Asia.^{lxi} A daily news bulletin from the Press Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation (4/28/2003), announced President Vladimir Putin’s Meeting with Mufti of Tajikistan Muslims Amonulla Nematzade. It stated:

It is extremely important to foster direct contacts between the Muslim organizations of Tajikistan and Russia, Russian President Vladimir Putin declared at a meeting with Amonulla

Nematzade, the Mufti of Tajikistan Muslims. Putin noted that present-day Russia is developing as a multiconfessional state. Good relations have been established between the members of the various religions, in particular, between Orthodox believers and Muslims...Millions of Muslims live in Russia who regard it as their country. This makes it possible to call Russia to a certain degree a part of the Muslim world, the President stressed. In this context, the head of the Russian state pointed out the usefulness of maintaining contacts between the Muslims of Russia and other countries, primarily the CIS countries...Putin expressed readiness to have a talk with his friends among the Muslims leaders in Russia so that they organize direct contacts with the Muslims in Tajikistan.”^{xiii}

Even though new opportunities emerged for linkages between the newly independent republics during the presidency of Putin, spiritual linkages between the newly independent republics and Russia remained severed for so long. Perhaps the most significant loss was the interruption of religious contact with Uzbekistan, which had the most educated Russian muftis from the last generation of the Soviet Union.

To remedy the lack of consistent contact between Russian and Central Asian Muftis, a delegation of Russian Muslims traveled to visit Uzbekistan in April-May 2007. The delegation was headed by the chairman of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of the Nizhny Novgorod region [Dumnyi] Hazrat Umar Idrisov and his chief of staff, Damir Hazrat Muhetdinovy. The purpose of the trip was to address the loss of fraternal ties with their co-religionists of the Republic of Uzbekistan, in the last fifteen years. The delegation met with the Mufti of the Republic Usmanhanom Alimov and visited Uzbek President Islam Karimov in Tashkent Islamic University, before visiting Tashkent Islamic Institute. The Mufti of Uzbekistan at the time, Usmanhan Alimov, said: “We have common roots in history: from the Volga Bulgaria, and then from other lands the peoples of modern Russia learned about Islam from our ancestors who lived on the land known as

Sogdiana. A well-known [Uzbek] madressa “Mir-i-Arab” produced a significant part of the current leaders of Islamic organizations in Russia. Indeed, it is precisely because Maverannahr came to the Muslims of the Volga-Ural region and Siberia that the Hanafi madhab and Sufism Tarikat Naqshbandiyya spread.” The delegation of Russian Muslims to Uzbekistan and then Kazakhstan heralded the beginning of a new stage of “Eurasian Islam.”

Chairman of the Russian Muftis Council Ravil Gaynutdin, believes that because Muslims of the former Soviet Union share common problems they should address them together. His suggestion for the establishment of the CIS Council of Muftis has been endorsed by leaders of Muslim Religious Board of Central Asia and Kazakhstan. His stated goal for such cooperation was the unification of our training programs for Muslim educational institutions and issuing fatwas on major issues. This proposal was shared in concert with the idea of a Eurasian Union – an idea suggested by Vladimir Putin and Nursultan Nazarbayev.

Fatwas in General: From Vodka to Circus Pigs

It is important to note that not all of the fatwas issued in Russia are related directly to nationalism. Alcohol fatwas from the region usually address vodka specifically.^{lxiii} One man asks: Can the unbeliever embrace Islam in a state of intoxication^{lxiv}? Does he have to wait for forty days [after he drinks to convert]?^{lxv} Mufti Alyautdinov responds: “The reality of our country is that it is difficult or impossible to find a public place that does not sell alcoholic drinks. Visiting a cafe or restaurant is not manifestly haram if we do not drink alcohol.”^{lxvi} There are also a number of fatwas on adoption and on whether one may work in an adoption agency,^{lxvii} which is not surprising given that many children are adopted from this region. Mufti Alyautdinov has also approved of oral sex^{lxviii} during Ramadan with one’s spouse^{lxix} as well as non-alcoholic beer, photographs, fishing, aquarium fish, artificial flowers, condoms^{lxx}, the training of pigs in the circus^{lxxi} and silver, porcelain

and gold teeth. He has written fatwas against frequenting discos,^{lxxii} plastic surgery^{lxxiii}, Ahmadis and Scientologists.^{lxxiv} While I have highlighted fatwas related to the relationship of Islam to the state, it is essential that we acknowledge that fatwas from Russia and Central Asia also comment on and regulate many diverse questions and concerns of the Muslim community regarding Islamic beliefs and practices.

Conclusion

Come to my talk :)

ⁱ <https://muslim.ru/en/articles/140/3225/>

ⁱⁱ <https://muslim.ru/en/articles/140/3225/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://muslim.ru/en/articles/140/3225/>

^{iv} <https://muslim.ru/en/articles/140/3225/>

^v <https://muslim.ru/en/articles/140/3225/>

^{vi} <https://muslim.ru/en/articles/140/3225/>

^{vii} There are 64 muftis in the Russian Federation.

^{viii} See <http://www.interfax-religion.ru/?act=dujour&div=374>.

^{ix} Talgat Tajuddin, the head of Central Muslim Board of Russia, offered a way to combat the rise of China and Chinese influence through assimilation. In an interview published by Bashkirian issue of Komsomolskaya Pravda in November 2009, he said, “The Chinese will soon capture all of Siberia. I would direct one million Tatars, one million of Bashkirs to the Far East, and would have them marry Chinese and Korean women.”^{ix} According to him, the first wife of Tatars and Bashkirs, for example, must be a woman of their nation. “And after that we would secure our country and eastern frontiers at the same time. This is the natural problem decision. And though we speak about it as for fun, it’s still necessary to solve a demographic problem. Therefore - marry, multiply and replenish.” He has also expressed approvingly idea of polygamy. He stated, “I have no right to consider it negatively. Neither on the grounds of Sharia, nor under the law. The more children, the better the state.” He pointed out that ancient Prophets Abraham and Solomon were polygamists, and Prophet Mohammed also had some wives. He explained: “Therefore it’s allowed for every Moslem to have up to four wives. But he should be able to support all of them.” See <http://www.interfax-religion.com/?act=news&div=6678>.

^x See <http://www.interfax-religion.ru/?act=dujour&div=374>.

^{xi} See <http://www.interfax-religion.ru/?act=dujour&div=374>.

^{xii} Since tsarist times, Islam, unlike Orthodox Christianity, has had its headquarters outside the Russian capital. If Gainutdin had become the head of the united Muftiate, it would have had its headquarters in Moscow, which would have certainly allowed the new supreme mufti to have more influence in Russian affairs.

^{xiii} See <http://www.interfax-religion.ru/?act=dujour&div=374>.

^{xiv} Russia Mufties Council regards education as the main resource for future development of the Muslim society determining the role of Muslim community in the life of the country and on the world scene. The Education Office was created in 2006. Education offered abroad includes: Short-term courses of Foreign Languages (Arabic and English), Bachelor degrees in Islamic and secular sciences, and Master of Science degrees in Islamic and secular sciences. Annually, students from Russia enter world famous Islamic Universities, among which are “Al Azhar”, and the International Islamic University of Malaysia. In 2007, the Russia Mufti Council signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Islamic Development bank for providing diligent Muslims students from Russia with a scholarship as *qard hasan* for studying in a higher institution. Among the countries where Muslim students from Russia are receiving and upgrading their education now are: Egypt, Malaysia, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Syria.

^{xv} <http://www.muslim.ru/2/cont/70/1344.htm>.