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Who Will Manage the 2 Million Shiites of Russia?

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KEY WEST, Florida &mdash Russia's three largest Muslim spiritual directorates are now actively discussing the possible formation of a single Muslim hierarchy, but neither they nor the Russian powers that be appear to be paying much attention to one group of Muslims there &mdash the more than 2.1 million followers of Shiite Islam.

All of the Russian MSDs are Sunni in orientation, a illustration of how until the 1990s there were few Shiite Muslims in the Russian Federation, and those few could look to the Transcaucasian MSD based in Baku, whose head, the sheikh ul-Islam, was responsible for all Shiites in the Soviet Union.

But the collapse of the Soviet Union had two consequences. On the one hand, it unleashed powerful migration flows, as a result of which some 2 million Azerbaijanis, almost all of whom are traditionally Shiite, came to Russia. And on the other, their traditional leader in Baku was now in a foreign country.

Curiously, neither the MSDs in Russia nor the Russian authorities have shown much interest in trying to solve this situation. The Sunni leadership in Russia has often viewed the Shiites as a foreign, even alien element, despite the fact that as a result of Soviet anti-religious efforts, few Muslims, Sunni or Shiite in Russia can explain the distinction between them.

And Moscow has been more interested in winning the support of Allashakhur Pasha-zade, the Baku sheik ul-Islam, even to the point of securing his selection as head of a CIS-wide religious group, than in seeing yet another Muslim spiritual directorate, this time Shiite in orientation, on Russian territory.

Today, however, there are three reasons why this neglect is no longer sustainable. First, because Russian MSDs are not supporting the Shiite immigrant workers, many of the latter are turning to unofficial and more radical imams for instruction, something that threatens to exacerbate the already severe tensions between the migrant laborers and the Russian population.

Second, because Iran is the leading Shiite power and because there are large Shiite populations in Azerbaijan and in Iraq, the Russian powers that be have a clear interest in presenting themselves as supportive of the Shiites rather than as opponents of this trend that approximately 10 percent of the world's Muslims follow.

And third, if the three Sunni MSDs in the Russian Federation are able to come together, something that is far from certain at present, at least some among the Russian powers that be are likely to want to have yet another lever they can use against an increasingly united Muslim umma in the Russian Federation.

That makes the question of the status of the more than two million Shiites in the Russian Federation more important, something that a conference of Shiites from Syria, Palestine, Azerbaijan, Turkey and Russia in St. Petersburg at the end of last month highlighted for the Russian audience.

Speaking to that meeting, Taras Cherniyenko, the director of the Prague Institute of the Dialogue of Civilizations, said that despite the presence of 600,000 Shiites in St. Petersburg and 1.5 million Shiites in Moscow, Russian scholars have devoted "practically" no attention to this trend in Islam.

"The works of Shiite authors are in practice not translated and very little published," he continued, even though Muslims and Russian officials must certainly know that "precisely Shiite Islam can be a most effective factor in blocking the activity of various kinds of reactionaries who speak out in the name of Islam."

As a first step toward rectifying this situation, Cherniyenko said, "the main task of Russia Shiites today [must be] the formation of a single spiritual movement and the establishment of [their own separate] religious organization." His words have been picked up by various Muslim websites, but it remains to be seen how the Shiites of Russia will respond.

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