

Fight Over Islam and Money Brings Violence to Kazan

By [The Moscow Times](#)

July 30, 2012



People walking in a square near Kul Sharif, the main mosque in Kazan, on July 21, two days after the attacks on two of Tatarstan's top Muslim clerics. **Roman Kruchinin**

KAZAN — Not far from glitzy boulevards where an oil boom has sent up stadiums and high-rises overlooking the Volga River, women in headscarves wander through Islamic bookstores selling pamphlets on the institution of Shariah in Russia.

Kazan has long had an image as a showcase of religious tolerance. But that reputation was shattered by a car bombing and fatal shooting carried out only hours before the start of the holy month of Ramadan on July 19.

On the wall outside the bookshop, a flyer in the local Tatar language calls for Muslims to unite against the region's top religious leader, Mufti Ildus Faizov, who was wounded in the attacks, which also killed his associate.

“Things will only get worse here, and Muslims will be the ones who suffer the most,” said Anisa Karabayeva, 43, her face framed by a white hijab, a traditional headscarf.

“Will there be more bombs? Probably,” she said flatly, standing in front of a display case stocked with Qurans and prayer rugs.

The attacks came against a background of anger among many Muslims who complain that the authorities in Tatarstan are restricting Islam in the name of fighting radicalism. It is a dispute that also involves a struggle for money and influence in this increasingly prosperous oil-producing region.

For decades, Russia has endured violence in mostly Muslim provinces in the North Caucasus. But booming Tatarstan, 2,000 kilometers away from the war zones, had largely avoided unrest until now. Moderate Muslims in Tatarstan blame the violence on the arrival of radical groups, such as followers of Sunni Islam’s strict Wahhabi movement and the outlawed organization Hizb ut-Tahrir, which seeks an Islamic caliphate.

This month’s attacks resemble strikes against moderate muftis in places like Dagestan, next door to Chechnya. Kazan is now on increased alert for more attacks. Outside mosques, police rifle through the belongings and bags of the faithful, who line up in front of metal detectors.

“Today, Islam is growing strongly in Kazan. ... But there are different sects and movements that you simply cannot control,” said Ramil Mingarayev, an imam at the al-Marjani mosque. “We try to fight radicals. We have tried to clean our city of them. But there are hidden mosques in basements and in the forests where they gather and distribute forbidden literature.”

Some of those fears arise from threats made by North Caucasus militants far away. Chechen guerrilla leader Doku Umarov called for an uprising among Russia’s Muslims last year, mentioning Tatarstan by name.

“I want to appeal to the Muslim brothers who live on Russian-occupied Muslim land. ... I call on you to destroy the enemies of Allah wherever you are. I call on you to destroy them where your hand reaches and to open fronts of jihad,” he said in a video posted on the insurgency-affiliated website Kavkaz Center.

Since becoming head of the Tatarstan branch of the Spiritual Board of Muslims in April last year, Faizov has been praised by Kremlin authorities for what they say are measures to clamp down on radical sentiment and encourage traditional forms of Islamic practice seen as more moderate.

Religion is also a big business, which has made him enemies. Four months ago, Faizov gave near-exclusive rights in Tatarstan to sell tours to Mecca for the annual hajj pilgrimage to Tatar Business World, a company that his office’s website says it controls. Many Muslims complained that the price went up.

Rustem Gataullin, the chairman of the company that previously had rights to sell pilgrimage tours, was one of 40 to 100 people who were detained in relation to this month’s attacks, according to Interfax.

“He had his enemies,” said Gabid Hayruddinov, 73, who reads prayers for the Muslim faithful who come to him in search of help in the city’s main mosque, Kul Sharif.

“He promised to make the hajj tours cheaper, but instead they became even more expensive: They went from 120,000 to 150,000 rubles,” an increase of about \$1,000, he said, his light blue eyes set deep against his dark, wizened skin.

Small protests against Faizov had bubbled throughout the year in Kazan, culminating with an open letter to him published in Russian and Tatar in various newspapers and on the Internet, calling for the price of hajj tours to be cut.

Faizov was unavailable to talk when calls were made to his office. His deputy was likewise unavailable, as was another imam with strong ties to the Spiritual Board of Muslims.

Beneath the 18th-century al-Marjani mosque, a dark tunnel leads from the room for prayer to the Islamic school across the street. Five times a day, the dozens of students make their way through the stone entrance, perform ablutions, pray and return.

For those who experience the country’s failing social welfare programs and chronically corrupt court system and police force, stricter versions of Islam hold out the hope for a more just society.

“It’s good we have the authorities; without them there would be chaos,” said Zakhid Anovarov, a burly 20-year-old student with a thin black beard.

“But it’s not a just system, because it’s a man-made system. If we were governed by Shariah, then life would be better, more just,” he said of the Islamic law code.

Many of the students are migrants from elsewhere in Russia or other former Soviet states to Kazan, where construction money has created new jobs, including sprucing up the city to hold the World University Games next year.

Zarifa Kamilova came to Kazan in 2004 to escape the aftermath of the Second Chechen War in her hometown of Grozny, where federal forces had toppled a separatist government. Like other Chechens in Kazan, she was drawn to its Muslim majority and the opportunity to find work. But she said she fears that pressure by the authorities will marginalize Muslims, leading more and more of them to radicalism.

“I have already taken five books off my shelves this year because they were considered too radical,” she said, referring to an ever-expanding list of literature outlawed by the Justice Ministry.

She and other Muslims say they have felt increasing pressure since Faizov assumed his post.

“This alone is turning normal people into radicals. It’s not that more people are becoming radical. It’s that their definition is encompassing more and more people,” she said.

She said she fears a government crackdown on Muslims that will ban more religious literature that she would otherwise sell in her store, where everything from electronic Qurans to prayer rugs to Chinese-made clocks with prayers on them is on offer.

Referring to previous crackdowns on illegal groups like Hizb ut-Tahrir, which thrives in Central Asia and has been brought to Russia by immigrants, she said she has never faced arrest. But “I have learned one thing: Never think it can’t happen to you,” she said.

Muslims in Kazan said Faizov also initiated a bid to take over leadership at the Kul Sharif Mosque, a visual symbol of the renaissance of Islam in Kazan. Completed in 2005, it sits on the site of a medieval mosque destroyed in the 16th century by Ivan the Terrible, who conquered the Kazan Khanate, a Tatar state ruled by descendants of Genghis Khan.

In his battle with radical Islam, perhaps none of Faizov’s efforts was as divisive as his demand that imams of all mosques undergo a course in traditional Hanafi Islam, the movement traditionally associated with Tatarstan.

In December, angry Muslims stormed the main mosque in the town of Almetyevsk, 270 kilometers from Kazan, and for hours refused to let local religious authorities enter. The confrontation was eventually defused by Faizov, but resentment still burns.

Near Almetyevsk, in the village of Novoye Nadyrovo, authorities removed the local imam, Ilnar Kharisov, from his post a few months ago. Friends said he was detained the night of July 20, the day after the attacks in Kazan.

Kharisov, a young scholar who had studied abroad and taken the name Abdul-malik, still has a religious following in the village, and his sacking as imam split the community.

“They’ve taken all the good imams away and replaced them with clowns, and they protect them there with police. People are very unhappy here,” said a neighbor of Kharisov who gave his name only as Ramil.

Original url:

<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2012/07/30/fight-over-islam-and-money-brings-violence-to-kazan-a-16628>