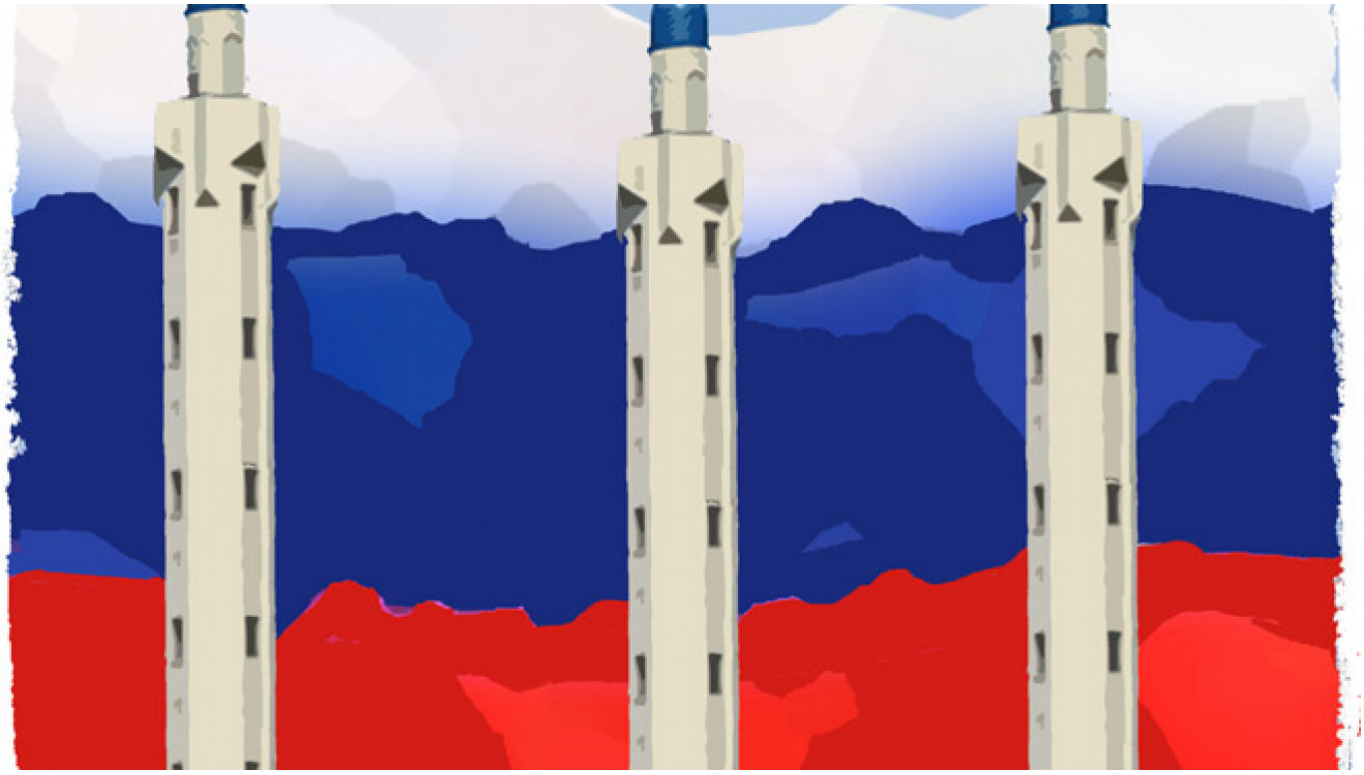
The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russia's Corruption Stokes ISIS Terrorism

By Ivan Sukhov

July 03, 2014



Ramadan began in Moscow on June 28, as it did throughout the Arab world. When that period of fasting ends one month later, tens of thousands of believers will gather at each of the capital city's four mosques. The structures cannot hold so many of the faithful, and, as always, the mass of worshippers spills over and fills the side streets.

Such a scene might sound more typical of Cairo or Tehran, but it is just one face of the rapidly changing capital. Muscovites nervously joke that the city will soon turn into the Islamic metropolis of Moskvabad, but in that quip can be discerned the outlines of a very possible future.

Russia is a Muslim land — an estimated 10 million to 15 million Muslims live here, or 10 percent of the population. Although this number is too small to put Russia in the same category as Egypt, Pakistan or Indonesia, it is large enough to seriously change the country's familiar cultural landscape.

What's more, the quality of official statistics has always been suspect: even border guards and police do not know how many migrants from Central Asia are now in Russia. Two out of every three worshippers at any one of Moscow's mosques are Tajik construction workers, Uzbek merchants or Kyrgyz yard workers. More than 3 million Muslims live and worship in Moscow alone.

Russia has several predominately Islamic regions, but whereas Tatarstan and Bashkortostan enjoy favorable economic conditions, the North Caucasus most decidedly does not. At the same time, Dagestan, Chechnya and Ingushetia are the only Russian regions where the birth rate significantly and consistently exceeds the death rate.

Dagestan alone adds 30,000 workers to the labor market every year. Even if all the Soviet enterprises that ever existed in that region were fully restored, they could not employ that number of people.

These workers leave the region and settle throughout the country, from neighboring Stavropol — where in many traditionally Russian areas the Russian-speaking population is already a minority — to distant oil and gas regions of northern Siberia.

Consider, for example, the city of Surgut that boasts the largest "expat" community of North Caucasus natives in the country. In a number of Russian towns and cities, the locals are only now realizing that time is now demarcated by the daily call to prayer. But relations are not always peaceful.

Russian armored vehicles rolled into the village of Belozerye in the republic of Mordovia on June 4.

Only 6 percent of Mordovia is Muslim, but the predominately Tatar population of Belozerye is 97 percent Muslim. Eight Mosques serve a population of 3,000. The Muslim community of the village long ago assumed responsibility for the municipal government and is apparently coping with the task quite well: the people of Belozerye are prospering.

But that success does not come without costs: 130 Muslims from Belozerye are currently fighting beyond Russia's borders, among the ranks of militants in Pakistan's tribal areas and in the army of the Syrian opposition.

The armored vehicles in Belozerye provide cover for Federal Security Service investigators who want to avoid any unpleasant surprises when the town's mujahedin return home.

Militants of Russian origin fight alongside the opponents of Syrian President Bashar Assad — that is, on the side many Europeans support. Recent events in Iraq have reminded many in the West of who the truly dangerous and implacable enemy is: combat groups of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant — some of whom fight against Assad — are seeking to topple the Iraqi government.

Now Russia is facing the same enemy. Russian-born militants fighting in Syria return home, posing a potential threat here: in Dagestan, in the first five months of 2014 alone, the authorities detained about 15 participants in Syria's civil war.

Because the smoldering conflict in the North Caucasus has spawned terrorist attacks in major

cities, many Russians fear and hate Muslims, making it extremely difficult for them to integrate into Russian society. A civil war is under way in the North Caucasus and Moscow has placed its bets on a particular side in that conflict.

The Russian authorities believe that the region's "traditional" Islam is relatively peaceful, in contrast to "imported" Islam from theological universities in the Middle East, universities that the authorities consider a breeding ground for terrorists.

Of course, it is with good reason that recent graduates of Al-Azhar University in Cairo contend that they are better versed in Islamic dogma than their fathers and grandfathers, who at best studied in the few KGB-controlled madrasas available during the Soviet era.

The "official" Muslim clergy take advantage of the unlimited siloviki resources the state provides them as representatives of "traditional" Islam. The result: at times they need only give a nod of the head to have an desirable person blacklisted as an Islamic radical and removed without a trace.

However, by taking sides in this conflict, the state becomes entangled in a dogmatic dispute that would find better resolution in the mosque than in the local branch of the Federal Security Service, or FSB. No country in the world, with the possible exception of an Islamic emirate state, is equipped to participate in a religious dispute.

At the same time, young people in the North Caucasus do not draw any fundamental distinction between the corrupt "traditional" understanding of Islam and the interpretation offered by young Muslim reformists. Instead, the accidental and intentional abuses of force perpetrated by the siloviki tend to provoke an oppositional attitude among the youth and rally them against all nonextremist Islamic groups of whatever stripe.

Although most Muslims do not support the idea of armed jihad, sympathy for the militants is growing. Some of their commanders are even beginning to show signs of what might even be called "soft power." How else to explain the pre-Ramadan video released by Aliaskhab Kebekov, emir of the Caucasus Emirate group, in which he called on his followers to stop their attacks on children and the elderly, and to end female suicide bombings?

Meanwhile, the battle between militants and the siloviki is serving as a crucible from which a new social model is emerging.

The main problem in Russia is its public institutions: the schools and clinics in deep decline, the dysfunctional police and the often unjust courts.

In turns out that the young Muslims of the North Caucasus are among the few communities in Russia that are trying remedy that sad state of affairs.

Those who achieve some success in big cities often return to their native villages to work as doctors, teachers or imams at mosques. Members of that community who live in the city open stores, restaurants, factories, private schools and law offices. Their rigid adherence to religious principles combined with their ability to achieve material success naturally makes them role models for the youth.

Tired of the state's inaction, they are forming a new societal model before our eyes — even as

the district police, FSB, and ineffective municipal workers who pride themselves on the Russian flag and double-headed eagle contribute almost nothing to anyone's quality of life.

This ever-increasing level of activity calls to mind the European Protestants and British Puritans who also drew energy from their faith for the colossal task of reconstructing the world around them — and eventually achieving impressive results. They also began as minorities in their own countries, not unlike the Muslims in modern Russia.

Ivan Sukhov is a journalist who has covered conflicts in Russia and the CIS for the past 15 years.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/07/03/russias-corruption-stokes-isis-terrorism-a37013