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Prominent Russian Muslim Cleric Gets Into Hot Water Over 'Wife-Beating Guidance'

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Timur Kamaev. **Timur Kamaev / VK**

Timur Kamaev, a prominent Imam from Russia's republic of Tatarstan, found himself at the center of a nationwide scandal this week after releasing a video in which he appears to instruct believers on the proper ways to beat one's wife.

Released on Monday as a part of the Tea With Hazrat podcast series, the original video has since been removed by its publisher — but this has done little to dispel the heated debate that spilled far beyond Russia's Muslim community.

The Moscow Times has gathered everything you need to know about the controversy.

Who is Timur Kamaev?

Kamaev, 30, is one of the most high-profile Muslim clerics in Russia and the head of the Irek

Mosque located in the heart of Tatarstan's capital Kazan.

Opened in 2018, the mosque was built in memory of Irek Minnikhanov, the son of Tatarstan's head Rustam Minnikhanov who was among the 50 passengers killed in the 2013 Tatarstan Airlines flight No. 363 crash.

Tatarstan's flagship business daily Business Online describes the mosque as "frequently visited by Tatarstan's VIPs."

What is 'Tea With Hazrat'?

Tea With Hazrat is a podcast produced by Tatarstan's flagship state-owned news agency Tatar-Inform.

In each episode of the podcast, Kamaev answers questions about Islamic practices that were allegedly submitted by listeners. Past episodes of the podcast discuss topics such as "social networks and gadgets in Islam," "superstitions associated with funeral practices" and "whether games are allowed in Islam."

In line with the podcast's name, Kamaev is seen enjoying a cup of tea and sweets inside the Irek Mosque in every video.

What did Kamaev say in the latest video?

In the latest episode of Tea With Hazrat, Kamaev aimed to address the question of how believers should interpret the 34th verse in the fourth chapter of the Quran, which speaks on how a man should deal with disloyalty on the part of his wife.

"You should always start with admonition, that is, try to explain to your wife why she is in the wrong. You should always speak to her beautifully and wisely," said Kamaev.

Next, according to Kamaev, a disobedient wife can be punished by sleeping in separate beds.

"In extraordinary cases," said Kamaev, "The āyah [verse] suggests beating."

Beatings, according to the Imam, will allow the woman "to understand that she is doing something wrong" and can be done using a miswak, a teeth-cleaning twig made from the wood of the Salvadora persica tree.

"Gently hit the wife with the miswak a couple of times — but work the arm only from the elbow down, not the entire shoulder joint — with small blows," said Kamaev.

"The point [of beating] is not to injure the person, not to leave bruises, but to gently say 'stop, you are doing something wrong, your husband is already unhappy, he already reached the point when he is raising his hand'," Kamaev continued. "But here we must understand that the terms 'beating' and 'beating up' mean different things."

How are people reacting?

"The Prophet [Muhammad] never beat [his wives] or approved of physical violence in the

family. I do not think that [beating someone] is acceptable in families and relationships," prominent Islamic psychologist and sexologist Khava Shaidullina told the Kazan Online news outlet, adding that she believes the verse in question advises the husband to grant his wife a divorce instead of beating her.

Prominent women's rights activist Alyona Popova said on Telegram that Kamaev's words should be seen as "nothing but propaganda of violence" that cannot be justified.

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Popova's words were echoed in a statement issued by Marem, a support group helping female victims of domestic abuse and violence in the majority Muslim republics of the North Caucasus.

"A respected person, a religious figure whose recommendations are valued and followed...says that physical punishment is acceptable. This will be perceived as a go-ahead for assault. No one will go into detail to understand what kind of stick the imam is talking about," it said.

Some, however, chose to back Kamaev.

Aynur Birgalin, the head Mufti of neighboring Bashkortostan, said that hitting someone with the miswak "wouldn't cause any pain."

"Are you trying to say that hitting someone with a twig is such a scary thing or something?" Birgalin told Kazan Online.

What are officials saying?

Tatar-Inform deleted the video from YouTube following widespread public backlash and followed up with a statement issued on Tuesday morning saying that Kamaev's words had been "taken out of context" by the media.

Later on Tuesday, the agency issued a follow-up statement titled "We Consider Violence Unacceptable in Any Religion."

The Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Tatarstan, the region's highest religious authority, also backed Kamaev, advising his critics to "watch the podcast in its entirety."

Tatarstan's head Rustam Minnikhanov is yet to comment on the issue.

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