Islam and Nationalism: the Case of Tatarstan
A Description of the Context

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1. The Global Context

As early as in the nineteenth century, the elites of some Muslim peoples realized their defeat in the face of the Western expansion and a need to respond to that challenge. According to Anthony Smith, the challenge of modernization presented to a traditional society may result in three types of reactions.[1] One of them may be called assimilationist, that is, when people try and become a part of the West; I am not going to dwell on this type of reaction much further. Oftentimes it is only short-term and turns into one of the other reactions. The two others are of direct interest to me for the purposes of this paper. This is, firstly, a traditionalist reaction that manifests itself in negation or conscious ignoring of modernization, calls for seclusion in the traditional religious community, and longing for the time when Islam was on the cutting edge of the world civilization. According to this view, the current problems should be resolved by going back to the religious practices of the golden age. Religion has to be restored to its original form by purification from later distortion. This is the path to victory; and victory in the Weberian sense would mean the restoration of status and prestige to one's community. Incidentally, it is because of difficulties of retaining community's prestige that assimilationist reaction is often short lived.

But there is also a reformist reaction which can be described as an attempt to beat the West in its own game. On the one hand, reformists recognize that they have to learn from the West to make their societies more competitive (and learning involves not only technology, but social and political institutes). In particular, in the same 19th century the Western idea of nation was being contemplated by some Muslim intellectuals. On the other hand, the West within this approach is still counterposed against one's native society as a competitor. (Even if not immediately on the impact with the West, then after some time.) So, from this perspective the reformist reaction differs from the traditionalist primarily in the means by which the victory over the West should be achieved: whereas one approach employs the means of the 7th century, the other follows the preceipts of the 19th century.

These reactions are, of course, only ideal types that in reality co-exist not only in one and the same society but often even in one and the same person. Nevertheless, one can discern countries and periods in which one or the other type of reaction is dominant. For instance, there is Egypt and there is Saudi Arabia and, likewise, there is the period of the 1950s and there is the present time. I'd argue that religion and nationalism behave like connected vessels; once in awhile the system is tipped one way or the other and we observe more of religion or more of nationalism. This is probably because at the heart of both the reformist and the traditionalist reaction is what Liah Greenfeld calls *ressentiment*, which she defines after Frederic Nietzsche as a state of existential envy and hatred, and of frustration that proceeds from one's incapability to gratify those feelings.[2] I'd personally choose a softer definition, in the spirit of Ernest Gellner, that resentment comes from an acutely felt inequality of one's own community and culture with a dominant foreign one.[3] This feeling can be cast in either religious or nationalist form.

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[1] Smith, Anthony D. (1995). Nations and Nationalism in a Global Era. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
[2] Liah Greenfeld (1992). Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
[3] Gellner, Ernest (1983). Nations and Nationalism. Oxford, England: Basil Blackwell.

Since the 19th century one could observe the growth of the reformist (nationalist) reaction to modernization at the expense of the traditional (religious) practices. Thus in the Ottoman Empire there was the Tanzimat period followed by the Young Turks and then by the Kemalists. Each period was progressively more nationalist and less religious. Likewise, in Russia there were jadids, pan-Turkists, and then national Bolsheviks. The Islamic secular nationalisms peaked in the middle of the 20th century when a number of secular nationalist regime tried various versions of accelerated modernization to catch up with the West (oftentimes under the influence of the USSR these efforts had a socialist tinge). At the same time, the religious reaction was also present; secular countries were also the cradle of such organizations as the Muslim Brothers, which were, of course, strictly prosecuted by the secular regimes. And certainly even at the peak of secular nationalism there were whole countries where the religious reaction was dominant: such as Saudi Arabia and later Iran and Afghanistan. High oil prices in the 1970s were a factor that helped the export of the Islamist ideas, for instance, from Saudi Arabia to Pakistan and then on to Afghanistan.[4] The weakening and then the fall of the Soviet Union became an additional factor that tipped the balance between Islamism and secularism: the socialist ideas that many secular regimes espoused were discredited and at the same time Islamists took credit for the Soviet collapse. (The purported defeat of the Soviets in Afghanistan is often presented as the major cause of the Soviet collapse.)

Thus since about the 1970s the global trend has been reversed: religious fundamentalism has been on the counteroffensive on the positions of secular nationalism. It is probable that the reversal can be explained by failures of the secular regimes in their competition with the West in terms of delivering better lives to people and resolving the symbolically important Arab-Israeli conflict. In other words, secularism did not help Muslims get rid of the acutely felt inequality of their society and culture vis-a-vis the West. When looking at such small and ostensibly far-removed places as Tatarstan, one should take this context into account. Furthermore, one may hypothesize that failures of nationalism may tip the balance to the side of religion there just as they have done in other places.

2. The Imperial Russian and the Soviet context.

As in many other aspects, the Russian Empire and the USSR on the one hand were a part of the global process and on the other hand substantially influenced the latter. As Helene Carrere d'Encausse points out, the Russian Muslims were the first to find themselves governed by a non-Muslim entity.[5] Therefore the interaction of their own culture with the foreign dominant culture were felt more acutely and earlier. Consequently, the religious and philosophical reflection on such a situation began rather early even if compared with the Ottoman Empire that had a lot of interaction with the West. These reflections included both adoption of some Western ideas and reactions against those ideas. The Volga Tatars in particular played an important role in these processes for several reasons. First, they were the first Muslim group forcefully conquered by Russia as early as in the 16th century. Secondly, because of the government policies of that time, the overwhelming part of the Tatar military elite converted to Christianity and became (assimilated to) Russians, while the remaining unassimilated part was stripped of the noble status and reduced to the peasantry status. Under Catherine the Great their noble priviliges were restored but by that time the traditional elite had given way to commercial bourgeoisie, which helped modernization of the Volga Tatars in the 19th century. (Cf. the role of the commercial Armenian elite vs. the role of traditional Azeri elite. Modernization of Armenians went much faster to their advantage against the Azeris.)

[4]   Kepel, Gilles (2001). Jihad: Expansion et declin de l'Islamisme. Paris: Gallimard.
[5]   Carrere d'Encausse, Helene (1988). Islam and the Russian Empire: Reform and Revolution in Central Asia. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Both nationalist and religious reactions were present in the modern Tatar elite. The religious reaction was in some ways also reformist because the conservative Muslim clerics fully recognized and cooperated with the czarist authorities; thus, they did not really go to a pure original Islam of the 7th century but rather tried to adjust Islam to their particular situation.[6] And of course there was a more reformist nationalist reaction that was on the rise by the time of the Russian revolution.

The main form of their nationalism at that time was pan-Tatarism or pan-Turkism, that is they were developing a project of a single large Muslim nation in Russia. Not quite coincidentally, these developments were taking place mostly under the two last Emperors when Russian nationalism, with some religious overtones, was the official ideology. That is, the government was developing a project of a large Russian nation that would include all Orthodox peoples of the Russian Empire and at the same time there was a spontaneous project of a large Muslim nation that ran sometimes into hurdles created by the government officials. This spontaneous project was in fact a reaction to the official Russian project which left little room for Muslims.

After the revolution, the Bolshevik policies seemed to be premised on a Russian saying that *two bears would not live in the same lair*. Therefore the Bolsheviks decided to cut each bear of a nationalism into a host of harmless bunnies. The national Bolsheviks on their part continued to promote the idea of a single Muslim nation, but a series of repressions that started in 1923 made those who survived drop the idea.[7] In fairness, the old Russian national project was also dissected into a number of smaller projects. Whereas the Ukrainian, Belorussian and Karelian national projects could in part be explained by the Piedmont principle (creating a socialist showcase for the ethnic brethren across the Soviet border in Poland, Finland, and Estonia), the Mordovian or Udmurtian national projects can hardly be explained in those terms. The residual principle of forming Russian territories can be explained from this perspective; as Yuri Slezkine writes, those were territories not claimed by any other ethnic group.[8]

The unity of this multitude of ethnically defined territories was supposed to be ensured by the one ideology and the one party. The ethnic units, according to Stalin's formula, had to be national in form and socialist in content. But as the failure of the Soviet project became increasingly apparent in the late Soviet period, the Soviet identity was becoming inasmuch less attractive and, contrary to Stalin's plan, the nationalist form prevailed over the socialist contents. When the linchpin of socialism fell out, the USSR constituent republics found little that would link them together. Nevertheless, although the socialist project failed, the multitude of national projects proved a success. Whereas there were no Uzbek nation 100 years ago, it certainly exists now. And compartmentalization of the Muslim people into nations was also successful in the sense that alongside the Kazan Tatar identity there is also Bashkir identity and these are different to the extent that these brotherly nations are quarreling with each other over various issues, much as Russians and Ukrainians are.

3. A post-Soviet case of Tatarstan

6   Dudoignon, Stephan (1997). «Кадимизм: элементы социологии мусульманского традиционализма в татарском мире и в Мавераннахре (конец 18 – нач. 19 вв.)» в книге: «Ислам в татарском мире: история и современность», Казань.
7   David D. Laitin, Roger Petersen, and John W. Slocum, "Language and the State: Russia and the Soviet Union in Comparative Perspective," pp. 129-167 in Alexander J. Motyl, ed., Thinking Theoretically About Soviet Nationalities: History and Comparison in the Study of the USSR. New York: Columbia University Press, 1992.
8   Yuri Slezkine, "The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism." *Slavic Review,* 1994, vol. 53, p. 414–452.

3.1. Factors of the Tatar nationalism in the Soviet period

The post-Sovet nationalist movements in Russia were relatively weak in the Orthodox Christian republics of Russia and much stronger in non-Orthodox republics, including Islamic republics.[9] One can see in this an echo of the Russian national project of the Imperial period: the Orthodox peoples of the European Russia still feel more comfortable in Russia than do other peoples. Indeed, in spite of the Soviet Constitution that proclaimed equality of nations. the USSR featured a system of ethnic stratification where the Muslim people found themselves at the bottom of the hierarchy. Their traditional culture was considered a barrier in the path of socialist modernization, Communist party membership rate was low, and their career outside of ethnic republics was difficult.[10] That was the principal driver behind the nationalist movement of the late 1980s whose purpose was to upgrate the status of Tatarstan in the Union.

3.2. Islam as a tool of nationalism

In the late eighties and early nineties nationalism was no doubt the leading driver relative to Islam. To quote Damir Iskhakov, one of the nationalist leaders: «The Spirtitual Board of Muslims (SBM) of Tatarstan, although it was an independent organization, was developing as a faction of the nationalist movement.»[11] In fact, the SBM RT came to life thanks to the nationalist movement. In the Soviet times all Muslim parishes of European Russia and Siberia were subordinated to the Central SBM headed by Talgat Tajutdin, an ethnic Tatar, whose headquarters were and still are in the city of Ufa in Bashkiria. The Tatar nationalists urged him to relocate to Kazan, but after his refusal started working on establishing an alternative religious organization. At the same time, within the old religious authority the junior imams started a power struggle with Mr. Tajutdin for financial and symbolic resources at his disposal that were rapidly increasing on the wave of renewed interest in religion in the late eighties (book sales and foreign aid). Promises of financial assistance by representatives of the Saudi Arabia whose advances were turned down by Mr. Tajutdin also played a role in the religious schism (the Moscow Muslim conference in the fall of 1992).[12] At that time salafite literature in large quantities comes to Russia, there are exchanges of students and teachers of Islam with the Middle Eastern countries, including Saudi Arabia. And all this happens on the background of idelogical vacuum left by the collapse of Communism and largely forgotten native religious tradition.

3.3. President Shaimiev's power vertical

Meanwhile, President Shaimiev of Tatarstan was playing a subtle game with the nationalist movement. On the one hand, he used it as a bargaining chip in his negotiations with Moscow to win many concessions from the federal center. As a result, his republic's status was indeed elevated and many goals of the nationalist movement seemed to have been fulfilled. On the other hand, the poignant example of Chechnya where the nationalist movement wiped out the old Communist elite like him could not pass unnoticed by this experienced and shrewd apparatchik.

[9]   Dmitry Gorenburg, "Nationalism for the Masses: Popular Support for Nationalism in Russia's Ethnic Republics." *Europe-Asia Studies,* vol. 53, no. 1, 2001, pp. 73-104.

[10]   John A. Armstrong "The Ethnic Scene in the Soviet Union: The View of the Dictatorship", pp. 227-256 in Rachel Denber, ed., The Soviet Nationality Reader: The Disintegration in Context. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992

[11]   Мухаметшин Р. «На путях к конфессиональной политике: ислам в Татарстане» в книге: «Преодолевая государственно-конфессиональные отношения.» Н.Новгород: 2003.

[12]   Якупов В.Я. Исламский компонент государственно-конфессиональных отношений в Татарстане в 90-е годы XX века (историко-политический анализ). Кандидатская диссертация. Ин-т истории АН Татарстана, Казань 2004, с. 34.

Consequently, as soon as the treaty with Moscow (whereby the special status of the republic was confirmed) was signed in 1994, the nationalist movement became redundant and Mr. Shaimiev's policy with respect to nationalists changed. Some of them who he thought was not dangerous were coopted in the ruling elite whereas others were softly repressed. (For instance, soon after the treaty with Moscow was signed, the Kazan office of the Ittifak party was closed and next year they also shut down the party's newspaper.)

Mr. Shaimiev's very soon built such a strong power vertical in his republic that still beats that of Mr. Putin. Mr. Shaimiev's authority is not confined to matters of state but also extends to religious issues. Back in 1992 he supported the independent SBM in Tatarstan so that almost no open supporters of Mr. Tajutdin were left in Tatarstan; all parishes were forcefully transferred to the new religious authority. A few years later (in 1998), the President's administration «helped» elect the current Mufti Gusman Iskhakov instead of the first Mufti of Tatarstan Gabdulla Galiulla who Mr. Shaimiev thought was too independent. In the Kazan millenium year, Mr. Shaimiev personally decided who the rector (imam hatib) of the new grand mosque would be. (It's as if President Putin not only chose the person of the next Patriarch but also of the rector of the Christ the Savior Cathedral. He does neither.)

Of course, such policies make some people unhappy but they were justified in the eyes of the people at large because Tatarstan was then, as they said, a sovereign state within Russia. But when Mr. Putin became the new Russian president, the situation got changed very rapidly.

3.4. Mr. Putin's power vertical

The center's demand to bring local laws in agreement with the Russian federal laws (1999), imposition of the seven federal districts that brought together various provinces and introduction of plenipotentiary representatives of the Russian president in those districts (2000), cancellation of some rights of the local government (in particular, with respect to use of natural resources), increasing share of taxes to be paid to Moscow, and finally cancellation of local gubernatorial elections coupled with the right of the Russian president to disband regional legislatures (2005) makes one discern the growth of unitary if not authoritarian trends. People in those provinces that are economically advanced and/or rich in natural resources, including Tatarstan, have exhibited particular displeasure with the newly emerging Russian political system. In addition to economical complaints, the political actors in such ethnic republics as Tatarstan also grumble against what they see as Moscow's attempt to undermine their nationhood. So far the federal center has obviously won and the republics given in. In Tatarstan the easiness of Moscow's victory was in part due to the fact that Mr. Shaimiev's power vertical had created a political void where little political opportunity was left for resistance to anything.

Although early in Mr. Putin's presidency their were calls for President Shaimiev to lean on his people, he preferred not to take the risk. Indeed, after his suppression of the nationalist movement it was unwise for him to try and repeat the game. Furthermore, the example of Chechnya was another inhibiting factor. First, as I have pointed out, that example showed quite clearly that nationalists might get out of control and oust former Communists like Mr. Shaimiev. Secondly, the replay of the Chechen war showed that Mr. Putin was capable of making tough decisions which turned out to be popular in the Russian society.

3.5. Failure of nationalism may tip the balance in favor of islamism

The important consequence of the federal power vertical is that it creates a legitimacy problem for Mr. Shaimiev. The republic has been stripped of all attributes of sovereignty that the nationalist movement stood for. Mr. Shaimiev suppressed the movement and busted what they had gained together. Of course, the Tatarstani media are under Shaimiev's control, which helps him as does general economic growth in Russia. But many nationalists feel defeated or disappointed. At the same time. a mix of religious and nationalist ideology is still attractive to many Tatars. The memory of mass mobilization is still fresh. Nationalist ideas are still plentiful in the local press. The current situation is a fragile balance between the religious and nationalist activists, the republic's government and the federal center. The balance between nationalism and religion is changing; religion is no longer driven by nationalism but has become an independent phenomenon. The situation in the Caucasus in this respect has gone much farther with nationalist identity often becoming more important than ethnic identity; at the same time horizontal ties between religious activists of various ethnic groups proliferate.

The situation in Tatarstan is quite different from that in the Caucasus but fundamentalists can be found there, too. Financial resources, as I have mentioned, play a role in the process. For instance, one senior Muslim cleric in Tatarstan in a personal interview describes a situation particularly typical for rural ares: at first, the fundamentalists start helping an imam with money and then he becomes attached to them. To leave them then becomes difficult or impossible. Iskhak Lotfulin, the imam khatib of a Kazan mosque, told a similar story to a correspondent of Moscow's «Nezavisimaia Gazeta».[13] Once islamists have effectively bought out a mosque they organize services according to their custom and preach their sermons. In the same interview, Mr. Lotfulin accused Mufti Gusman Iskhakov (who was de facto appointed by Shaimiev) in getting kickbacks from such deals and that the Mufti made a similar proposition to him as well.

Secular nationalists loyal to the government openly worry about these developments. Damir Iskhakov wrote in *Zvezda Povolzh'ia* (a local newspaper) that the first prayer in the newly opened grand mosque was organized according to the salafite custom. He and several other secular nationalists staunchly campaigned against the Mufti on the eve of his re-election in February 2006 accusing him and islamists in general in leaving little room for Tatar nationhood in their vision of universalist Islam.

Uncoopted and alienated nationalists on their part have for several years been in alliance with the religious opposition. Thus when the former Mufti Gabdulla Galliulla lost elections in 1998 under the pressure from President Shaimiev, he was immediately supported by the nationalist parties Ittifak and Milli Mejlis. It's interesting that much of the Tatarstani opposition voices their dissent on the islam.ru Web site.

Finally, although I'll stress again that this is neither Iraq nor even Dagestan, there is some violent activity as well. Two years ago a pipeline was blown after which arrests of religious activists has become a routine practice, which in fact further complicates the situation. Just very recently the local press published some information about a discovered conspiracy ring whose purpose was to commit large-scale terrorist acts during the millennium celebration in Kazan which included an attempt on President Putin's life. This suggests that the political intiative is passing from nationalists to islamists, which causes concern of such people as Damir Iskhakov.

4. Conclusions

To conclude on a very abstract level, one may discern two types of causes of religious activism in Tatarstan. The external causes relate to the global trend which could not but affect Tatarstan

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[13]   Постнова, Вера. Мечети обороняются от ваххабизма// Независимая газета. - 280 (3393) 24 декабря 2004

at the moment of ideological crisis that prompted a search for alternative ideologies. The internal causes, also in very general terms, are failures of the nationalists movement.

This may also suggest that the traditional argument of secularization as an irreversible global Trend should be somewhat modified. It's probable that nationalism and religion are related to the extent that one can flow into the other and back. At some point, the new (post-nationalist) religious identification can even dominate over the national identification. Thus, the obituaries of Gil Keppel and Oliver Roy to fundamentalism may be premature.[14]

Those obituaries were premised on the assumption that modernization under the Islamic slogans was not possible and therefore Islamism would never be able to produce palpable success for its people in the long run. But why not? Max Weber linked the origins of modernization to a particular religious tradition. I do not see why another religious tradition cannot, at some point, launch its own modernization. In fact, given Greenfeld's model of «borrowed nationalism» (where nationalism of one nation serves as a model for another would-be nation) I'd argue it's likely and in the long run almost inevitable. (Consider the progress of Singapour and then of other Confucian societies.)

But then if Islamic modernization (and success) is possible in principle, this raises another fascinating question: can the bunnies cut by the Soviets and otherwise glue together into a larger beast? The answer in the short run is a definite no. Nevertheless, given the data that show that the more religious people are the less important they think ethnic differences are, I would not exclude such possibility in the long run.

To return to a more practical plane, I would make two statements. Firstly, the federal center should not go too far in constructing its power vertical because the energy of frustrated nationalism can easily flow into religious sentiment and feed extremism on a larger scale. (This is what we already see in the North Caucasus.) Secondly, having a centralized Muslim authority with a monopoly on religious expression may be a losing strategy in Tatarstan. The religious opposition will always find ways to teach and preach where the authorities will not reach them. On the other hand, as the situation in Bashkortostan suggests, having alternative religious structures creates competition which restrains the competing authorities and makes them work carefully. For instance, when one of the Bashkortostan religious schools was re-subordinated to Mr. Tajutdin after one of its students had been found to participate in the Kukmor explosion, the other schools, I daresay, took notice.[15] At the same time there is less incetive in Bashkortostan to set up illegal schools or, as they call it, «to go to the country», and this means that situation can be better controlled. The policy of rigid centralization is no better on the level of the republic than it is on the federal level.

[14] Kepel, Gilles. Op. cit.; Roy, Oliver (1998) The Failure of Political Islam. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

[15] Галлямов, Рушан (2007). Исламское возрождение в Волгоуральском макрорегионе: Сравнительный анализ моделей Башкортостана и Татарстана.// Ислам от Каспия до Урала: макрорегиональный подход. Саппоро (Япония): Центр славянских исследований Университета Хоккайдо.