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**ISLAMIC FACTOR IN THE ESTABLISHMENT OF CHECHEN
STATEHOOD IN LATE 20TH CENTURY**

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Abstract

The paper examines a religious factor in the establishment of Chechen statehood in late 20th century. The religious factor can have a disintegrating effect on public life and increase tensions in public relations. The major threats to the state security of the Russian Federation from religious and political extremists are to impose an “Islamic State” model through armed crackdowns on dissenting voices. The revival and noticeable political excitation of traditional Islam in Chechnya in the early 1990s was accompanied by the onset of Wahhabism – a pronounced religious and political movement in Sunni Islam. The spread of Islamic fundamentalism on the territory of the Chechen Republic was ramped up by numerous international radical Islamic centers, as well as cultural, educational and charitable organizations. Before the outbreak of hostilities in Chechnya, the ideology of fundamentalism did not have a significant political force. The number of followers of this doctrine was insufficient, whereas the majority of Chechens deemed it as an alien phenomenon. Once combined with local religious traditions, this teaching underwent certain transformations. Wahhabism in the early 1990s acquired a military character and became a symbol of resistance and justification of crimes against “kaffirs”. Relations between representatives of traditional Sufism and Wahhabism sharply deteriorated after the first Chechen campaign in 1994-1996. The Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, having ceased to exist, was transformed into an administrative-territorial entity (vilayet) within a virtual “North Caucasian Emirate”, and the separatists of the North Caucasian republics began to be called “fronts of the emirate”.

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Keywords: Traditional Islam, Wahhabism, ideology of fundamentalism, Islamic extremism, Islamic state



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1. Introduction

In the 90s of the twentieth century, entailed by the collapse of communist ideology, there was a rise in the religious consciousness of people. In the Chechen Republic, this phenomenon came about through the efforts to give back religious buildings to worshippers and construct new mosques, and through the rejection of atheistic views. Islam was a dominating factor in the rehabilitation of the Chechen people. After the separatists headed by D. Dudayev came to power, Islam began to be actively exploited as an ideological weapon in the confrontation with the federal center and pro-Russian forces in Chechnya at large.

2. Problem Statement

The revival and noticeable political excitation of traditional Islam in Chechnya in the early 1990s was accompanied by the onset of a previously unknown trend of Wahhabism. In armed conflict, many political forces appealed to it, often from extremist positions. The spread of Islamic fundamentalism on the territory of the Chechen Republic was ramped up by numerous international radical Islamic centers, as well as cultural, educational and charitable organizations. The ratio of the norms of secular and Sharia law in modern practices of the Chechen society was actuated by the commitment from a part of the population, especially young Muslims, to live pursuant to the norms of Sharia.

3. Research Questions

The object of research is the religious factor as a specific phenomenon to shape Chechen statehood in late 20th century.

4. Purpose of the Study

The paper aims to explore a complex and contradictory impact of traditional and radical Islam on the political and military processes that took place in Chechnya in the 1990s.

5. Research Methods

The methodology is based on a combination of general scientific and historical methods. The paper relies on the principles of historical research, enabling to address the crucial events that took place in Chechnya in the 90s of the twentieth century. An interdisciplinary approach brings about the integrity of the topic under consideration. The paper is cross-disciplinary involving the history of social philosophy and religious studies.

A content analysis is applied through the evaluation and systematization of materials and resulting generalized implications.

6. Findings

A systemic transformation of the Soviet system was especially acute in the Chechen Republic that in the 1990s turned into a springboard for separatism and international terrorism, becoming a zone of religious and political extremism. The problem of an Islamic alternative in the development of Russian-Chechen society in the post-Soviet period is of particular relevance. The topic of Islamic extremism, Wahhabism was reflected in the publications by Malashenko (2007), Akaev (2008), Vok (2006), Gadzhiev (2004) and others.

Dunlop (1998), Bennet (1998) and Smith (1998) took a critical look at the actions of Russian authorities in the first Chechen campaign in 1994-1996, which refused to seek a compromise with the Dudayev regime.

Klebnikov (1999) in his article “Conflagration in Russia” reports that A. Maskhadov elected president as a result of a popular vote in 1997, tried to return the republic to the civilized world and tried to avoid a war with Russia. The Russian government has always treated him as a powerless insignificance, since he failed to extend his power to Islamic militants.

Bowker (2004) and Blandy (2003), partly laid the blame for the second campaign in Chechnya in 1999 on the Chechen separatists, who during the time of de facto independence were unable to establish effective institutions of power, ensure the rights of citizens, but adopted the ideas of radical Islam in state building matters.

The revival and noticeable political excitation of traditional Islam in Chechnya in the early 1990s was accompanied by the onset of a previously unknown trend of Wahhabism – a pronounced religious and political movement in Sunni Islam. D. Dudayev and his entourage initially focused on a secular constitutional state, but since 1993, as the conflict escalated, the separatists, seeking to increase their legitimacy, adopted the ideology of Wahhabism.

Since the early 1990s such Islamic organizations as the Islamic Salvation Front, Benevolence International Foundation (BIF, headquartered in Chicago, USA), Jamiat Ihya at-Turaz al Islami (headquarters in Kuwait), Lashkar-e-Taiba (headquarters in Pakistan), Al-Khairiya, Al-Haramein, an educational center in the United States, Qatar (headquarters in Qatar), Ikraa (headquarters in Jeddah (KSA), Ibrahim bin Ibrahim (headquarters in Jeddah (KSA) and others, which were funded and directed by Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait (Khanbabaev, 2008).

Before the outbreak of hostilities in Chechnya, the ideology of fundamentalism did not have a significant political force. The number of followers of this doctrine was insufficient, whereas the majority of Chechens deemed it as an alien phenomenon. Once combined with local religious traditions, this teaching was somehow transformed. The situation changed dramatically during the armed conflict, when a significant number of mercenaries appeared in the republic, and foreign Islamist organizations supplied weapons and other means (including financial) to continue the hostilities.

The representatives of Wahhabism reject a regional model of Islam and show an intolerant attitude towards non-Islamic traditions. According to Islamic extremists, a universal value constituting the political system of society is a caliphate. It is a system of power in which a person with the title of caliph, by the decision and consent of the members of the ummah (Muslim community) has administrative, executive, but not legislative power, since the only law-giver is Allah (Noskov, 2002).

As far as they are concerned, jihad is only an armed struggle against unbelievers (kafirs – non-Muslims, pagans), munafiqun (people of Islamic descent who “pretend” to be Muslims, but in fact are not such in their convictions and way of life), and most importantly – with apostate Muslims that include all Muslims who do not share the teaching of Wahhabism (Melikhov, 2000). Religious extremists showed particular hatred towards the regional clergy, accusing them of “cooperation with the special services” that “oppress Islam”.

The military-political confrontation with the Federal Center, especially during the first Chechen campaign in 1994–1996, aggravated the situation, contributing to the legalization of Wahhabism.

On March 23, 1995, a decree “On Sharia Courts” was issued, whereby Sharia courts were in force in parallel with the secular courts. The adoption of Sharia courts into the judicial system came from the National Congress of the Chechen Republic – Ichkeria on March 9, 1995 (Gumashvili, 1997).

Following the signing of Khasav-Yurt agreements, the process of building an Islamic state intensified in Chechnya. Chechen schoolchildren were taught the Arabic language and Law of Islam. There was strict governmental control over the performance of religious rites; heads of state and profit-making organizations were obliged to provide premises for saying Namaz; the sale of alcohol was banned.

Some of the articles in the newly-adopted criminal code of the CRI (1996) were based on Islamic law. In 1997, the disbanded secular courts replaced the Sharia courts. Immigrants from the Middle Eastern states worked in the system of Sharia courts in Ichkeria.

Several Islamic parties were in place in Chechnya. The major parties were Islamic Nation (leader – M. Udugov), Islamic Way (leader – B. Gantemirov), Congress of the Peoples of Ichkeria and Dagestan (leader – Sh. Basayev), etc. There were also some religious charitable organizations and Islamic cultural foundations (Khanbabaev, 2008).

The authors share the opinion of Malashenko (2001), who claims that secular politicians were the leaders of Wahhabism in Chechnya. Almost all adherents of Salafi, including Z. Yandarbiev, M. Udugov, commander of the armed forces Sh. Basaev, I. Khalimov, A. Khusainov and many others were secular politicians, and the idea of returning to “true Islam” and the establishment of an Islamic state played an instrumental role for them. Appealing to “pure” Islam, they sought to implement practical tasks, such as getting access to the Caspian Sea, establishing control over the oil pipeline, and acquiring financial support from abroad.

On January 27, 1997, there were elections of the President, Vice-President and deputies of the Parliament of the CRI in the Chechen Republic. The situation in the Chechen Republic in the second half of the 1990s can be described as a crisis. Maskhadov took on a position of maneuvering between the interests of various political forces, trying to preserve a semblance of law and order. However, he could not cope with state-building problems. Chechnya continued to exist at the expense of the Russian budget, electricity and energy resources supplied by Russia. The new leadership of Chechnya faced vital socio-economic challenges, including the social infrastructure and housing stock destroyed by the warfare, non-payment of pensions and salaries, ubiquitous unemployment, etc. Official figures show that in 1998 there were 300 thousand unemployed in Chechnya; almost all of the able-bodied population living in the republic (Muzaev, 1998).

The further political situation in Chechnya developed in the confrontation between the presidential camp and the forces of the radical opposition. An example is the major clash in Gudermes in July 1998 between the Sharia Guard, the Islamic Special Forces Battalion and the Sufis, which resulted in the deaths of more than 50 people. President A. Maskhadov named the supporters of Wahhabism as the culprits of the riots (Khanbabaev, 2009).

Shortly after the events in Gudermes, the Mufti of Chechnya A. Kadyrov openly opposed the Wahhabis at the Congress of Muslims of the North Caucasus and received support from Muslims. Congress participants spoke about the need to prohibit Wahhabis from working in administrative bodies, and generally refuse to cooperate with them (this was nothing more than a direct appeal to A. Maskhadov, who at that time was forced to embark on a path of cooperation with Islamic radicals) (Elbuzdukaeva & Izripova, 2018).

A. Maskhadov turned a deaf ear to the decision of the Congress, followed the lead of the Wahhabis. On January 2, 1999, at a joint session of the Parliament and members of the Supreme Sharia Court with the participation of the mufti, a proposal was made to rename the legislative body into Mejlis and create a separate committee within it – shura, to which clerics were elected. On February 3, 1999, “Sharia Rule in Full” was brought in (Decree of the President of the CRI, 1999).

A significant part of the deputies opposed the establishment of a religious committee within parliament. In his interview to the newspaper *Golos Chechenskoy Respubliki*, Deputy Chairman of the Media Committee Dokka Amagov expressed the opinion of the majority of the deputies. Speaking about the crisis caused by “attempts by religious and political forces to seize power at any cost and create a ruling class of emirs, princes, etc. among the Chechens,” he warned about the consequences of attacks on the Parliament and the Constitution of the CRI.

D. Amagov believed that the CIR Constitution already sufficiently reflected the role of religion in Chechen society. Thus, Article 4 proclaimed Islam the state religion, while Article 95 spoke to the Sharia legal procedure.

Soon, Shura, consisting of 35 members, elected Sh. Basayev as Amir, empowering him with “all the powers necessary to construct an independent Sharia state.” Sh. Basayev accused A. Maskhadov of repressions against “supporters of Chechnya’s independence” and fostered the split of the nation based on the “religious principle”. In his statement, Basayev called for the election of the head of the Sharia state. (Kudryavtsev, 1994).

Without dwelling on statements alone, in early August 1999, Basayev with a detachment of Islamists invaded the territory of the Tsumadinsky and Botlikhsky districts of Dagestan to create an Islamic state there. The self-proclaimed republic was headed by S. Ramazanov, Akhtaev’s brother who was a mild-wing thinker of the Wahhabi movement. Sh. Basayev was declared the emir of the “Islamic State of Dagestan” and, at the same time, served as the commander of the “United Army of Dagestani Mujahideen”. At the same time, Khattab announced the ultimate goal of their struggle – “the creation of an Islamic state from the Black to the Caspian Sea” (Paukov & Lefko, 1999).

Notably, there has always been a strong movement in Chechnya that opposed the activities of the Wahhabis. As early as before the start of the counter-terrorist operation, the Mufti of Chechnya A. Kadyrov repeatedly noted the destructive nature of the ideology of their Chechen apologists, pointed out

the harmful consequences of the influence of the latter for Chechnya. Therefore, following a forceful removal of the separatists from power and the decision by Russian President V. Putin to appoint A. Kadyrov the head of the Chechen Republic administration, the new leadership took a fundamentally tough stance towards Wahhabism. In the summer of 2001, Akhmad Kadyrov signed a decree whereby the activities of religious organizations and groups professing Wahhabism were banned on the territory of Chechnya.

7. Conclusion

Thus, the attempt of radical Islamists to establish an Islamic state on the territory of Dagestan and Chechnya failed, and North Caucasian Wahhabism proved itself to be a destructive religious and political factor associated with international terrorist groups. The Russian leadership represented by V. Putin placed a premium on A. Kadyrov, thereby including in the management of the subject of the Federation a representative of the local elite, who relied on the traditional North Caucasian Sufi Islam. Having provided A. Kadyrov with military and economic support, Moscow received a positive result, which made it possible not only to end the military conflict in Chechnya, but also to turn the Chechen Republic into a standard of a “new Caucasus”.

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