Understanding Islamic Education in Russia: The Struggle over Identity and Belonging in Russia’s Muslim-Majority Regions

Alisa Shishkina
with a Preface by Sam Greene
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Cover photo: An exterior view shows Kul Sharif (also known as Qol Sharif) mosque in Kazan, taken on July 21, 2012. Credit: REUTERS.
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Preface to the Report

Dr. Sam Greene
Director of Democratic Resilience, Center for European Policy Analysis

Russia's long-running conflict with Ukraine and its full-scale war in 2022 have had an impact within Russia itself, including exacerbating problems that, for one reason or another, have festered for years. Among the most pressing is the question of the place of Islamic identities in Russian society. If in previous periods Islamic identity suffered from a combination of malign neglect and active repression, the Kremlin's urgent need to consolidate society in 2022 has led it to project a unity of purpose, ideology, and identity across the country's ethnic, religious, and other dividing lines.

This unity, of course, is largely fictional – and 2022 has made that clearer than ever before, provoking a sense of grievance among many of the country's ethnic and religious minorities. And the inordinate burden borne by minority communities from the North Caucasus to East Siberia has deepened the sense that these supposedly constituent units of the Russian Federation are, in fact, being treated as colonies of a Russian empire.

Well before February 2022, Alisa Shishkina, a Russian sociologist and ethnographer, as well as Future Russia fellow at CEPA, investigated the push and pull of identity and politics in one particularly important subset of Russian regions, namely those where Muslims predominate. Dr Shishkina’s sensibility and ours suggested that many citizens of these regions, particularly young people, might be seeking to overcome poverty and marginalization by turning to alternative identities, including religious one. The results are what you have before you here.

Because the majority of Dr Shishkina’s extensive fieldwork was conducted before February 2022, this report does not deal with the war as such. Nonetheless, its insights will be of tremendous value to analysts and policymakers trying to understand the social and political constraints the Kremlin faces now, and the significant long-term challenges Russian society could face in the near future.
Abstract

Islam has played a shifting and sometimes contentious role in the social construction of Russia’s Muslim-majority regions since the end of the Soviet Union. Among these processes, a growing interest in Islamic education has drawn an increasing number of young Russian citizens into a sphere that remains poorly institutionalized and practically unregulated. Islamic educational institutions could satisfy the demand for religious and religiously grounded education among young people and reduce the potential risks of youth involvement in radical and extremist groups. However, ill-advised and ineffective attempts to control this sphere by local authorities, regardless of the situations in the regions, risks provoking radicalization, contributing to sociopolitical instability in Russia’s Muslim-majority regions, in Russia more broadly, and globally.
GLOSSARY

**Adat** – local customary practices and traditions observed in Muslim communities in some regions of the world, including the North Caucasus.

**Fiqh** – Islamic jurisprudence, a process by means of which jurists derive sets of guidelines, rules, and regulations from the rulings laid down in the Qur’an and the Sunnah.

**Ijtihad** – in Islamic law, the independent or original interpretation of problems not precisely covered by the Qur’an, Hadith, or scholarly consensus.

**Imam** – an Islamic leadership position, commonly used as the title of a worship leader of a mosque.

**Jadidism** – the reform movement advocating the introduction of a modern educational system as a prerequisite for social change and cultural revitalization.

**Jamaat** – an Islamic council or assembly.

**Madhab** – a school of thought within Islamic jurisprudence. The major Sunni madhhabs are Hanafi, Maliki, Shaﬁ’i, and Hanbali.

**Madrasah** – a type of educational institution, secular or religious, for elementary instruction or higher learning.

**Maktab** – Muslim elementary school.

**Muftiat** – an administrative territorial entity under the supervision of a mufti, an Islamic jurist qualified to issue a nonbinding opinion on a point of Islamic law.

**Salafi** – conservative Muslim movement that attempts to return to the original teachings of Muhammad and his immediate followers.

**Shariah** – a religious law that lays down governing principles for spiritual, mental, and physical behavior that must be followed by Muslims.

**Sufism** – mystical Islamic belief and practice in which Muslims seek to find the truth of divine love and knowledge through direct personal experience of God.

**Tariqat** – a school or order of Sufism, or specifically a concept for the mystical teaching and spiritual practices of such an order with the aim of seeking the “ultimate truth.”

**Ulama** – the body of Muslim religious scholars and chief religious authorities, members of which often serve as teachers, judges, jurists, preachers, urban and rural imams, market inspectors, and advisors in various capacities.

**Ummah** – Muslim community.

**Zakat** – a donation, calculated as a percentage of wealth, that Muslims pay yearly to help those in need.
The impact of education on sociopolitical stability

Education plays an important role in matters of sociopolitical stability. It can help structure social engagement and institutionalize interactions between secular and religious social structures, thus engaging religious institutions in constructive communication with secular ones. Education can contribute to the socialization of young people, make them more receptive to liberal democratic values (including recognition of and respect for the rights of others), promote tolerance and a culture of peaceful discussion, and increase human capital, which makes possible the successful use of nonviolent tools to defend one’s interests. In countries with higher enrollment in formal education, the likelihood of armed conflict is reduced. In Russia’s North Caucasian republics, high rates of unemployment as well as large-scale social transformation, intensified migration, and the growing influence of globalization have largely led to the erosion of young people’s sense of identity: The old social regulators no longer work, and new ones have not yet been established. The processes of post-Soviet political, economic, and social development created both demand for Islamic education and the conditions for radicalization in Islamic institutions — in part as a response to social dislocation, economic breakdown, and poor governance.

The Islamic education system, which is currently being revived and institutionalized, could be a potential solution to the problem of youth radicalization. However, standardizing the Islamic educational system will be difficult, as institutions are currently independent from each other and excluded from both the state and international educational systems.

Thus, while Islamic education could become a powerful tool, capable of preventing the radicalization of young people by meeting their demand for religion and smoothing out ideological intransigence, the situation can only worsen with attempts to control and regulate these processes in ways that are insensitive to the situation in the regions.
Radicalization and global security

In some regions of Russia, primarily the North Caucasus republics, there has historically been a high risk of the emergence and spread of terrorist activity. Thus, the “waves” of the terrorist threat in 2002 and 2004, as well as in the second half of the 2000s, which became an echo of the Chechen wars, were significant in scale. Some parts of the North Caucasus remain torn by conflicts that have been only aggravated since the mid-2010s. These events have had mixed consequences. On the one hand, the emergence of a powerful center of Islamic radicalism attracted the most extremist Islamists from Russia and neighboring countries (for example, the terrorist underground group Vilayat Kavkaz, also known as the Caucasian Emirate). On the other hand, after Russia’s declaration of victory over the terrorists in Syria, the militants, with their accumulated experience, can disperse, and some have moved on to underground activities in their mother countries. Indeed, there has been a threefold increase in the number of terrorist attacks in different regions of the world in 2016-18. In addition, from 2012 to 2017, terrorist attacks increased in several regions, including the Middle East, Western Europe, and Turkey.

The situation is further complicated by the Islamic revival that has gained momentum in recent decades, which began after the collapse of the Soviet Union and emerged as a response to decades of Soviet suppression of religious identity in the USSR’s historically Islamic republics. By now, in the Muslim-majority regions of Russia, a rather strong demand for religion has arisen on the part of young people in particular. Attempts to ignore or suppress this demand can provoke push it underground and contribute to the formation of radical ideas, which can subsequently lead to the export of terrorism and threats to global security.

Background on Islamic education in Russia

The most numerous constituents of the Muslim Ummah in Russia fall into two groups: the Muslims of the Volga-Ural region, and those associated with the Muslims in the North Caucasus. The former are characterized by belonging to Sunni Islam of the Hanafi madhhab, which is followed by the majority of Muslims in Central Asia. Followers of the Shafi’i madhhab prevail in the North Caucasus. There is also a small Jafarite community in the south of Dagestan. In addition, large diasporic Muslim communities exist in the major cities of central Russia — Moscow, St. Petersburg — and in the northern territories of Russia.
Historically, the spread and establishment of Islam in the territory of what is now the Russian Federation dates back to the seventh century and was largely associated with the Arab conquests in Transcaucasia and the rule of the Umayyad caliphs. The Umayyad's campaigns in 707-708, 709-710, 713-714, or 721-722, for example, strongly influenced the culture of Derbent. Thus, Islam began to spread in what is now Dagestan from the middle of the eighth century, and since that time gradually expanded its influence in the region. At the same time, the territory of modern Dagestan for the Caucasian region acted as a center of Islamic science. The village of Tsakhur in the Rutul region played an important role. There, the first university-type madrasah in the Caucasus was built in 1075, becoming the center of the spread of Islam in the region in the Middle Ages.9

The system of Islamic education in the Muslim-majority regions of Russia from the first centuries of the penetration of Islam into these territories consisted of three parts: the Quranic school, maktab, and madrasah. Despite certain limitations, the system was quite effective and positively influenced the general level of education of the populations in these regions, particularly in the North Caucasus. Islamic
education was prestigious and sought after by many in society. In addition, it was often the only channel for obtaining knowledge for ethnic groups living in the Caucasian highlands.\textsuperscript{10}

As concerns the formation of a functioning system of Islamic education, South Dagestan’s experience was very successful, providing not only this region, but also neighboring countries such as Yemen and Syria as well as other countries in the Muslim world with educated people and teachers.\textsuperscript{11} The construction of a cathedral mosque and seven district mosques in the eighth century helped Derbent become the center of cultural life in the Muslim community and a place that attracted educated people, eventually turning into a major spiritual and educational center in the North Caucasus with its own educational traditions. In addition, the system of Islamic education that was formed in this way was designed not only for Arab settlers, but also for Muslims among the local peoples.\textsuperscript{12}

The system of Islamic education in different regions of the Russian Empire was independent of the state and secular authorities in terms of financing and existed mainly due to voluntary donations from the parents of students and zakats, among others. However, Islamic institutions were recognized by the imperial government, and from the second half of the 18\textsuperscript{th} century to 1917, there was a rapid increase in the number of mosques, madrasahs, and maktabs in the Turkic-speaking regions, including the middle and lower Volga regions, western Siberia, and the southern Urals.\textsuperscript{13} As Agnes Kefeli, a professor of history and religious studies at Arizona State University, notes, in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, traditional Islamic education among the inhabitants of the middle Volga region of the Russian Empire contributed to the Islamization of the Turkic peoples of this region and laid the foundation for the development of modernist Islam in Russia.\textsuperscript{14}

Thus, from the second half of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century to the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century, the ideology of Jadidism (a current of Islamic modernism) became widespread, new teaching methods were introduced, and the range of taught disciplines expanded to include secular sciences and the Russian language. The principles of Jadidism were aimed at preparing the Muslim intelligentsia for their subsequent involvement in Russian society outside of the narrow religious circle, as well as addressing the political and ideological problems faced by Muslims in the Russian Empire.\textsuperscript{15} By the beginning of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, the system of Islamic education included two components: traditional establishments, which were connected with the classical principles of Muslim theology (in this case, education was aimed at addressing intra-confessional issues, and graduates were not in demand outside the Ummah itself); and educational establishments shaped by Jadidist intellectuals, whose graduates were able to more easily adapt to various spheres of Russian society.\textsuperscript{16}
Though the ideas of renewal described above did not become widespread in the North Caucasus, most conservative legal scholars did not see a problem with introducing the humanities and natural sciences into Islamic education in that part of the Russian Empire. Secular disciplines had been taught in many madrasahs since their foundation in Dagestan, and madrasahs often became the center not only of religious teaching, but also of secular disciplines. The personalities of those who implemented these reforms became a stumbling block — the Jadidites, in addition to their innovative views on education, had a number of differences with Islamic orthodoxy, such as in matters of Sufism. In Dagestan, the main subject of discussion and the reason for open hostility was the traditionalists’ rejection of the Jadidites’ revisionist attempts regarding their views on the possibility of ijtihad in the modern world, the obligatory adherence to madhhab, and the activities of local Sufi brotherhoods. That is, the orthodox ulama were not against new disciplines, but against the spread of the ideas of “Islamic modernism” that were then emerging in Egypt and elsewhere, and the revision of the local Islamic heritage.

Islamic Universities in Russia's Regions

Map: Center for European Policy Analysis. Credit: OpenStreetMap Contributors.
Thus, the division into Jadidites and traditionalists was not based on attitudes toward more secular disciplines. Therefore, attempts to present the history of Islamic education in the Caucasus and in Russia as a whole as a kind of path of escapism and an ideologically tinged course toward self-isolation from the humanities and natural sciences, which is often found in texts by Soviet authors, turn out to be built on an insufficient understanding of the internal Islamic discourse of the 19th century. Nonetheless, by the beginning of the 20th century there had not yet emerged in the Russian Empire a consolidated system of Islamic education.

Whatever the shortcomings of Russia’s pre-revolutionary system of Islamic education may have been, it was nearly destroyed in the Soviet era. On the formal level, Islam was excised from the social and cultural life of the country, and the sole officially recognized Islamic educational institution during this period was in Uzbekistan (Mir-i Arab madrasah in Bukhara). This repression mainly affected Islamic education at the higher and middle levels, however. Informal elementary Islamic education persisted, becoming more private, domestic, and secret.

Islamic Universities in the North Caucasus

Map: Center for European Policy Analysis. Credit: OpenStreetMap Contributors.
In the post-Soviet period, there has been significant interest in Islam in the Muslim-majority of Russia, accompanied by a growing interest in religious study. According to the Council on Islamic Education, there are 18 Islamic universities in Russia, of which 11 are located in the North Caucasus, four in the Volga region, and one in Moscow. For a long time, they have developed independently, remaining outside the formal Russian education system.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, interest in Islam, including Islamic education, swelled in the North Caucasian republics, where the Soviet authorities had actively suppressed any manifestations of religiosity. The countries of the Middle East, primarily Saudi Arabia and Egypt, played an important role in this resurgence, by providing support to the Muslim-majority regions of Russia. In the 1990s, in connection with the sharp intensification of the political and social role of Islam, the Middle East became a powerful ideological center.

As the Russian social anthropologist Akhmet Yarlykapov notes, re-Islamization in the North Caucasus has taken on various forms. In the western regions, such as Adyghea and Karachay-Circassia, Islam had to be revived practically from scratch, leading to the emergence of so-called folk Islam. Both the emerging local clergy and missionaries from the neighboring North Caucasian republics (primarily from Chechnya and Dagestan) had significant influence. In the Eastern Caucasus republics, such as Ingushetia or Dagestan, on the contrary, even during the Soviet era, “there were influential Sufi groups, there were authoritative theologians... a full-fledged system of religious education remained.” Not surprisingly, the early post-Soviet period witnessed the rapid development of many Islamic educational institutions in Chechnya, Dagestan, and Ingushetia.

At the same time, the North Caucasus remains one of the regions of post-Soviet Russia where the issue of radicalization of ordinary Muslims and their involvement in terrorist activities is still significant. These trends intensified in the mid-2010s in connection with the emergence of the Islamic State (IS). For example, in April 2017 a Russian citizen of Chechen origin who fought on the side of IS in Syria committed a terrorist attack in a St. Petersburg metro car, killing 11 people and injuring dozens of others. At the end of June 2014, immediately after declaring himself “caliph,” Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi called Russia and the United States the leaders of the enemies of the Islamic world. By 2015, many leaders of the terrorist underground in the North Caucasus swore allegiance to al-Baghdadi and demanded that all other militants follow their example. Rustam Aselderov, who previously headed the Caucasus Emirate underground in Dagestan, became the head of the Caucasus Vilayat (the branch of the Islamic State in the North Caucasus). The heavy recruitment of IS militants from the ranks of the Caucasus Emirate was thus not accidental. In addition, Russian was one of the three most popular languages for IS propaganda.
Earlier studies have revealed that terrorist activity more than tripled in Russia in 2016. Most of the terrorist attacks in that year took place in the North Caucasus region and IS has claimed overall responsibility. Although this can be regarded as an IS post hoc branding exercise, we can draw the connection between its activities and the scale of further terrorist attacks, at least at the level of ideological statements.

Both the federal leadership of Russia and the local authorities use various mechanisms, including Islamic education, to counter the threats and challenges described above. In Russia, Islamic education is still poorly institutionalized and practically unregulated by secular authorities. The federal law on education leaves the activities of Islamic educational institutions in a gray zone — although most universities have a state license that gives them the right to carry out educational activities, there is no state standard for Islamic education. Because of this, none of them have accreditation, making them unable to issue state diplomas to their graduates.

In this regard, a series of questions arise related to Islamic educational institutions in the Muslim-majority regions of Russia. How do Islamic universities affect the
potential for radicalization? Further, what does the trajectory of Russian governance – including governance of higher education and of Muslim-majority regions – tell us about the future of Islamic identity in the country? These questions guided the field research conducted for this paper.

**Methodology and field research**

Article 14 of the Russian Constitution strictly separates state and religious institutions, leaving Islamic educational institutions outside the scope of state-funded education. In this context, two sets of questions arise.

First, how does the governance of Islamic education in Russia – and the relationship between Islamic institutions and Russia’s broader educational system – affect outcomes, in terms of identity and radicalization?

The second set of questions pertains to people’s personal trajectories (life and career). Why do people go to work and study in this area? What are their expectations? What are their life goals? Are they satisfied with what they receive?

Geographically, the North Caucasus is of greatest interest for this study. In addition, the results of a field study in the Republic of Tatarstan are presented as an example of a region with a different background in which attempts were made to develop mechanisms for managing the system of Islamic education. The research itself draws on a range of sources, including:

- Primary and secondary sources on the Islamic education system in Russia and globally;
- Data from a field study conducted by the author in Dagestan in 2019;
- Expert interviews with sociologists, scholars of Islam and the Caucasus, regional scholars, and employees of secular universities in the republics of the North Caucasus. The author also interviewed the first secretary of the Egyptian Embassy in Russia, Dr. Mohammed Al-Abrak, to discuss the problems with and opportunities for integrating the Islamic educational systems of Egypt and Russia;
- Semi-structured interviews with students, teachers, and mosque imams. The interview guides were designed with reference to the findings of the expert interviews and other sources, and with an eye to ensuring comparability of data in Dagestan, Ingushetia and Tatarstan (though the guides were adapted in the latter case). As the study was primarily concerned with the views of teachers, students, and imams of mosques on various aspects related to the
spread of the Islamic religion and Islamic education in the region, interview questionnaires covered several dimensions: the relationships between religion and the state, the state and Islamic educational institutions, informal religious institutions and Islamic universities, and different branches of Islam, as well as the issue of radicalization of Muslims (see Appendices 1 and 2);

- Curricula, course program materials, and teaching aids, collected in order to identify common features of information presentation and to elucidate the educational environment across institutions.

In the course of field research, the author also collected empirical material for further study on the topic of Islamic education in the Muslim-majority regions of Russia. In particular, the author conducted 46 interviews in Dagestan with teachers and students of Islamic universities, as well as imams and representatives of the Muftiate. The author carried out another 17 interviews in Ingushetia, and 11 in Tatarstan. This allowed the author to investigate the specifics of how the system of higher Islamic education functions in each of these republics.

The demand for Islamic education in Russia

Among the goals and motives for entering Islamic educational institutions, respondents most often mentioned the influence of the social environment; the religiosity of the family; the search for one’s identity and a comfortable community; and the absence of alternatives. For example, a 45-year-old lecturer from Buynaksk commented, “In Dagestan, what can a young person do? For example, for economic reasons, there is absolutely nothing for young people to do in Dagestan, there is no work here.”

Thus, some respondents noted that studying in an Islamic educational institution helped them overcome the feeling of abandonment (student, 32 years old, Makhachkala); in others, it activated interest in communicating with other people and “made a person calmer” (student, 34 years old, Buynaksk). In this case, popular demand for religious self-expression finds an outlet in the system of Islamic education, which forms a certain habitus and semantic field in the lives of the students. Thus, an Islamic education levels the possible radical moods among young people that appear in the presence of too many different sources of information and an inability to deal with it on their own.

Regarding the impact of the learning process in Islamic universities on their lives, students and teachers in most cases noted that they became more restrained and
began to show an interest in getting an education. Interviews with female students and teachers are especially noteworthy in this context:

“I was disobedient, but now I have changed 180 degrees. Religion calls us to a good attitude towards parents” (female teacher, 25-35 years old, Makhachkala).

“I was on the phone, I was not interested in anything, but it turns out there are so many things that can interest me” (female student, 32 years old, Makhachkala).

Others referenced having greater self-confidence as a result of studying at an Islamic university.

In many respects, students’ perception of the Islamic education system varied by region. When comparing the situation with Islamic education in Tatarstan and the North Caucasus, it turns out that there are more prospective students in Dagestan and Ingushetia than in Tatarstan. In their youth, the ethnic Muslims of Tatarstan were less observant, although the situation is changing due to young people who grew up in families that became more involved in Islamic practices after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In Tatarstan, the break in Islamic tradition during the Soviet period was more pronounced than in the North Caucasus, where the younger generations remained more immersed in Islamic tradition and culture from early childhood. Therefore, among applicants to madrasahs or bachelor’s programs at Islamic universities, Dagestanis are distinguished by a high level of training, but the gap in knowledge between graduates of Northern Caucasian universities and Tatarstan universities is reduced by the time students earn their bachelor’s degrees. At the master’s level and above, the gap is essentially gone, as shown by the results of field studies and, in particular, interviews with leaders of Islamic universities.

In Ingushetia, most students do not plan to join the clergy. They admit that they receive an Islamic education not to work toward a profession, but for personal development. At the same time, such an education significantly increases graduates’ social status, because of the high authority accorded to religion in society. In Dagestan, students reported that becoming an imam is a primary career objective. Graduates who do not plan to be religious figures pursue a secular professional or higher education in parallel with an Islamic education. Professions such as electrician and auto mechanic are common.

Students’ perception of the place of Islamic universities in society is also noteworthy. For example, a student in Makhachkala (21 years old), when asked whether the state should help them, answered, “Oh sure. Even if we compare with Christianity: They somehow help [Orthodox universities], and in Russia everyone can choose their religion, so I think it is necessary. If you help them, help us.”
In contrast to the somewhat zealous attitude toward educational institutions that receive state funding, students also expressed a point of view regarding the usefulness of Islamic universities for the state:

... Students and graduates of our university specifically, they bring the society spiritual, moral, patriotic education of youth. Even though the university does not have state support, it is of great benefit. What would happen if the university had state support? This benefit would be multiplied! (Student, 31 years old, Makhachkala).
The supply of Islamic education in Russia

Muslim-majority regions of Russia have become hostage to two opposing trends. On the one hand, the failure to meet the demand for religion on the part of legal Islamic institutions could lead to the radicalization of religious communities, should the process of obtaining Islamic education go underground. On the other hand, meeting this demand in full is also impossible, due to the limited opportunities for the graduates’ further employment. Today, there are no possibilities to employ a large number of graduates of Islamic universities, who are mostly qualified to work in religion (this situation is especially relevant with regard to Dagestan).

One important drawback of the current system of Islamic education revealed by the research is the largely spontaneous, unsystematized selection of literature for students in Islamic universities. In most cases, the so-called classical medieval sources for the study of Islamic law, theology, Islamic philosophy, and political

Islamic Educational Institutions in Russia

Maktab
Elementary level of Islamic education

In the 1000s

Madrasah
Secondary level of Islamic education

Several dozen licensed, more than 500 unregistered

Universities
Registered institutions of higher Islamic education

12 registered

Note: Not to scale. Iconography by Tama Gendis/TheNounProject.
thought are used as teaching aids. Almost nothing is taught about the large number of modern scientific Islamic studies, including those critical of the medieval heritage (for example, the works of Islamic reformers and modernists of the 19th and 20th centuries) in educational institutions. Of particular concern was the extremely limited teaching of history, which is restricted to practically the first few decades of the history of Islam. The subsequent history of Islam, which includes the standpoint of both religious and secular knowledge, and does not contradict the work of most major Islamic scholars, is more or less elided in most Islamic universities in Dagestan, for example. This leads to a kind of de-historicization of students’ consciousness, including in matters of the history of Islam, which opens up wide opportunities for manipulation by representatives of extremist circles. The leaders of Islamic universities are well aware of this problem. They are ready to expand the scope of Islamic studies, but a lack of qualified staff and funding to recruit experts from elsewhere has left this educational vacuum.

Financing of Islamic educational institutions is rather opaque and dependent upon student fees and donations. At the same time, channels of foreign financing, including from the Middle East, are blocked. Respondents noted that Islamic education is in dire need of funding because, unlike secular institutions, they do not receive state funding. One 32-year-old male student from Makhachkala said “They [the state] should help, no matter if we are religious or not. In our institution there is an opportunity to receive both religious and secular education.”

Islamic education in Dagestan is a rare example of a system in Russia that grew from grassroots initiatives. For three decades, since the collapse of the USSR, it has existed and developed autonomously. During this time, local educational centers have been formed in Buynaksk, Chirkey, Makhachkala, Kizilyurt, Khasavyurt, Derbent, and a number of other places in the republic.

In addition, Islamic universities in Dagestan actively proclaim that they are fighting against possible manifestations of extremism — for example, applicants must provide a certificate from the district police officer saying that a person has been vetted, and while training students undergo monthly prophylactic conversations with the involvement of the district police officer or other authorized employees. There is a strict ban, on pain of expulsion, on watching extremist videos. A 45-year-old teacher from Buynaksk noted, “We expelled a student from the university because he often watched the videos of Abu Umar [Sasiltinsky] on his phone. We asked why? He said it was just for fun. But if the person watches this, don’t expect good things from him.”

But, at the same time, Dagestani universities focus less on producing highly qualified specialists, and more on doing social and educational work with “high-risk” young people. In Dagestan most often it is young people from families with low incomes or
disadvantaged social status that study. And the level of Islamic education received by students remains quite low, often boiling down to memorizing the Quran.

In contrast to the universities of Dagestan, Islamic universities in Ingushetia have managed to move to a qualitatively different level of teaching. In the 1990s in Ingushetia, Islamic higher education was reduced to the study of the Arabic language and memorization of the Quran. However, in the 2010s it managed to move beyond the study of the Quran such, reaching a relatively good level of teaching Shariah disciplines (for example, fiqh, or Islamic law). In addition to religious subjects, general humanitarian subjects are studied at universities. This, in turn, has made it possible to somewhat expand career opportunities for graduates — not only as imams, but also translators, school teachers (mainly on the basics of religion), guides, and employees in the Federal Penitentiary Service and Ministry of Internal Affairs.
In Tatarstan, a republic with a smaller proportion of the Muslim population, there is a distinct set of problems, including a lack of religious personnel. About 50 mosques now operate without imams. In addition, about half of the current imams are older people. The system of training religious personnel that exists in Tatarstan is not ready to satisfy this need in the near future. This vacuum could be filled by non-Tatar individuals (including people from the republics of the North Caucasus or Central Asian countries), though Tatar society is critical of newcomers.

The availability of Islamic education in a given region is related to the economic situation, general federal policies toward Islam and Muslim-majority regions, interaction between secular and religious actors, and Islamophobia and the general perception of Muslims, among others. And if, as Russian academic Bulat Akhmetkarimov states, in the 1990s relations between the Russian state and Islam were mostly accommodationist, since the 2000s they have become increasingly regulatory, designed “to ensure privileged access in the Russian public sphere for state-approved ‘traditional’ religious organizations.” Thus, regional authorities often choose strategies that balance federal guidelines and republican characteristics. In Ingushetia, for example, there is some contradiction between Islamic norms (Shariah) and local customs (adat). Interviews with government officials suggest that state structures seem to rely on Shariah as a more flexible and less traditional system of norms, using it to minimize the negative impact of some practices associated with adat. However, the consequences of this are twofold. First, the merging of Shariah with adats in Ingushetia could provide a certain type of immunity to ideas (including radical ones) introduced from the outside (hence the recognition as Salafi of any trend of Islam that diverges from the tariqats that has taken root in the region — primarily Qadiriyya and partly Nakshibandiyya). Second, adats help preserve conservative values in society, slowing down the process of its modernization in terms of rapid urbanization, for example. However, it should be noted the regional authorities claim to be working to modernize society and the attitudes of religious institutions, with the term modernization implying strict adherence to the political course of Russia in all areas.
Outcomes

In some cases, the experience of Islamic universities in stabilizing the sociopolitical situation has been quite successful: despite the virtual absence of regulatory bodies, the Islamic universities of Dagestan, regardless of state policy, have counteracted the radical movements in the region.

When asked about the sources of radicalization among young people, students and graduates of Islamic universities noted corruption, lack of work, lack of sports infrastructure, and general social tension. Under these conditions, in their opinion, underground Islamic educational institutions become especially dangerous. At the same time, the respondents noted that people who have received a “correct” Islamic education are not immune from “leaving for the forest” – a euphemism for joining underground militant groups – which is also influenced by the difficulties of finding a job, by corruption, and, to a large extent, by the popularity and authority of radical movements.

As for the likelihood of engaging in protest to express their discontent, the prevailing view among students, graduates, and teachers of Islamic universities was that they could resort to protest actions in “any situation [that threatens] Islam” (for example, graduate, 27 years old, Khasavyurt). With some reservations (for example, regarding the approval of protest actions by the jamaat or asserting their rights under the Constitution of the Russian Federation), the majority of respondents expressed their readiness to participate in protest actions in cases that threaten their religious identity.

The exclusion of Islamic universities from Russia’s educational system has led to differences in the level of teaching and quality of education. Undoubtedly, universities have satisfied the demand of believers for imams, who serve in hundreds of new mosques built after the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, Islamic universities are coming to understand that a transition from quantitative to qualitative indicators of success is necessary. Local graduates cannot always compete for the influence over Ummah members with extremist recruiters trained in the educational centers of the Middle East and North Africa. In addition, the quality of graduates’ skills is affected by the fact that the main task of the university is often to pull young people out of a radical environment and keep them in a “normal” environment, including through material benefits provided by Islamic universities such as housing, food, and leisure activities.

In addition, the situation is further complicated by the fact that Islamic universities in Russia do not have accreditation. Work is being done to achieve accreditation by bringing Islamic education in line with state standards; to date, the Spiritual
Administrations of Muslims (SAM) have largely taken over this task. They are pursuing a policy of uniting the institutions under the auspices of SAM, offering in return opportunities to promote Islamic education in government structures and issue accreditation to affiliated universities. However, this in turn would limit the possibility of employment for Islamic university graduates, initially setting a narrow circle of career opportunities within religious institutions.

**The Hierarchy of Religious Institutions Overseeing Islamic Education**

- **Council on Islamic education**
  Implements a centralized policy in the field of Islamic education; develops links between international and regional institutions

- **Muslim Spiritual Administrations of Russian regions**
  Coordinate the activities of parishes; establish and maintain Islamic educational institutions at all levels; lead the development of syllabi and determine its ideological alignment

- **Islamic universities**
  Act as personnel resource centers; train specialists in the field of Muslim theology

Note: Not to scale. Iconography by Tama Gendis/TheNounProject.
Conclusions

The following conclusions emerge from the results of the field studies in Dagestan, Ingushetia, and Tatarstan:

1. **Islamic universities in Russia are excluded from the system of state education and are often reliant upon payments from students and donations from patrons. This leaves the selection and content of disciplines at the discretion of the universities’ administrations and, in part, the sponsors, creating a “gray zone” in the ideological orientation of educational programs, which could potentially lead to the spread of radical ideas.**

2. **There is increased interest in Islamic higher education, but relatively limited opportunities for universities to enroll students due to economic and staffing restraints. This may encourage those who did not enter an Islamic university to acquire knowledge either in foreign universities, which the Russian authorities consider as a potential threat, or through alternative channels, including those imposing radical ideas. In some of the Islamic universities in Dagestan, for example, education in Islamic universities often comes down to memorizing the Quran and learning the basics of the Arabic language. In general, the set of disciplines studied is narrow. This limits the set of graduates’ competencies, reduces the range of career trajectories, and creates difficulties with subsequent employment. Also, gaps in general knowledge and a lack of critical thinking skills increase the potential susceptibility to radical ideas.**

3. **In Dagestan, Islamic education is free and boarding is provided by a number of universities. This attracts a cohort of students with poor secondary school performances, who come from low-income families. Consequently, Dagestani universities focus less on producing highly qualified specialists, and more on doing social and ideological work with those young people from low-income families.**

4. **Islamic education may create the basis for the dissemination of Shariah norms in everyday life. At the same time, in some areas, primarily in the North Caucasus, traditional law (adat) practices can be found. Given the above discussion about strategies for choosing regional policies by local authorities, this may cause a conflict between Shariah and adats. On the one hand, Shariah minimizes the negative effect of archaic practices (e.g., honor killings, bride kidnappings). On the other hand, it forms a parallel legal system within the constituent entities of the Russian Federation. More than that, adats create a kind of immunity from alien, including radical and foreign,**
ideas. However, the practice of adat observance is an important factor in the consolidation of society.

5. In some Russian republics with a high percentage of Muslims such as Tatarstan, local authorities developed mechanisms for responding to potential risks of destabilization – in particular, the organization of remote education for students from other countries and the regulations surrounding the construction of mosques, among others. But the basic approach in all cases is to limit the use of foreign experience, particularly emanating from the Middle East. At the same time, there is a significant interest from applicants and students for reputable teachers from Middle Eastern countries.

6. There is a gap between the career prospects that applicants to Islamic universities expect to have versus what students actually face upon graduating. The discrepancy between expectations and reality gives rise to frustration and disappointment among graduates which, in turn, can become the basis for the accumulation of discontent.
Endnotes


3 Starodubrovskaya, Irina V. “Islamic Conflict and Violence in Local Communities.” Perspectives on Terrorism 14, no. 2 (2020): 80-92.

4 Although there is no consensus on the definition of the term “radicalization” (see, for example, Sedgwick, Mark. “The concept of radicalization as a source of confusion.” Terrorism and political violence 22, no. 4 (2010): 479-494), in this paper, it will be understood as the potential for involving the population, especially young people, in radical and terrorist movements.


11 Ibid.


16 Ibid.
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26  It is also important to mention here that Russian Orthodox theology is not excluded from state funded universities. In 2017 Theology degrees were introduced in Russian universities. More than that, for example, St. Tikhon’s Orthodox University issues state diplomas to its graduates. With regard to Islamic education, it is worth noting that in the 2000s, attempts were made to build a single, unified according to the standards of secular education, Russian language based Islamic education as part of the attempts to create ‘Russian Islam’. They were not successful, largely due to the lack of a homogeneous Islamic discourse in the muftiats of the regions of Russia.


