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RUSSIA: Is State's treatment of southern Muslims unjust?

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

Mufti Ismail Berdiyev, who belongs to the presidential Council for Co-operation with Religious Organisations, has told Forum 18 News Service that he supports "the general idea of attacking Wahhabism and terrorism," but cannot fully endorse every anti-terrorist measure. "Some state officials don't know the first thing about religion and go too far," he remarked, "we don't accept their mistakes." In the area he comes from, the authorities compile lists of suspected "Wahhabis". "I'm opposed to that," he told Forum 18, "if people are conducting terrorist activity then they should be prosecuted." Local imams state that there is an Islamic militant problem, but imam Magomed Erkenov told Forum 18 that the problem's scale did not warrant negative treatment of the entire Muslim community. Commenting on those fighting in Chechnya, he told Forum 18 that "They may have said that they were fighting against Russia, but if paid they would have fought against Muslims, or their own relatives. There is nothing holy about that war."

At their 29 September 2004 meeting at the Kremlin, chaired for the first time by President Vladimir Putin, members of Russia's presidential Council for Co-operation with Religious Organisations issued a statement which declared: "We support the actions of the Russian authorities in safeguarding the security of citizens and curbing terrorism."

One of 16 religious leaders on the presidential Council, Mufti Ismail Berdiyev explained to Forum 18 News Service on 29 October that, while he supported "the general idea of attacking Wahhabism and terrorism," he could not in fact fully endorse every anti-terrorist measure taken by the authorities. "Some state officials don't know the first thing about religion and go too far," he remarked, "we don't accept their mistakes." In the southern Karachai-Cherkessia republic, where Mufti Berdiyev heads the local Spiritual Directorate of Muslims, the authorities compile lists of suspected "Wahhabis", for example, he maintained to Forum 18. "I'm opposed to that - if people are conducting terrorist activity then they should be prosecuted."

Speaking to Forum 18 in Karachai-Cherkessia on 29 September, Dzhaga village imam Magomed Erkenov listed difficulty in registering new Muslim communities, frequent check-ups on mosques and state restrictions on sending students to and receiving funds from foreign Islamic countries as examples of the state's "negative policy towards all Muslims" in the republic. Regional religious affairs official Yevgeni Kratov, however, insisted to Forum 18 that the check-ups on mosques in Karachai-Cherkessia were part of a co-ordinated anti-terrorist state policy conducted "entirely within the framework of the law" (see F18News 1 November 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=442).

The type of pressure described by Karachai-Cherkessia's Muslim representatives does appear to be a reflection of a more hard-line policy reportedly already operating in neighbouring Kabardino-Balkaria. In October 2003, the Institute for War & Peace Reporting described how, to the indignation of both state-approved and independent Muslim leaders, the republic's authorities closed down several mosques in the regional capital Nalchik and a number of villages following a shoot-out between security services and suspected Islamic militants. While most of the mosques were later re-opened, according to the report, some of the worshippers detained at a Nalchik mosque following evening prayers on 14 September 2003 later complained of police brutality.

In a further report on 29 September 2004, the Institute for War & Peace Reporting cited Kabardino-Balkaria's president, Valeri Kokov, as stating that the authorities had compiled a list of 400 extremist suspects in the republic and put them under 24-hour surveillance. Top of the list, the imam of one popular mosque reportedly commented that this measure simply signified the authorities' frustration at failing to capture their opponents in the shoot-out of the previous year, "and now they are shifting their fury onto us, ordinary Muslims."

Notwithstanding such claims, the Karachai-Cherkessian Muslim representatives with whom Forum 18 spoke all acknowledged that a problem with Islamic militancy in the vicinity of Chechnya does exist. In particular, Mufti Ismail Berdiyev confirmed a 9 September 2004 report on Stavropol region's official website which claimed that several local imams had recently been dismissed from their posts for holding Wahhabi views. While these young Muslims in Stavropol region's eastern town of Neftekumsk had been affiliated to his own Spiritual Directorate before they were expelled, he told Forum 18, "we didn't know them - and we condemn their criminal links with Chechnya."

Back in Karachai-Cherkessia, however, Magomed Erkenov maintained to Forum 18 that the scale of this problem did not warrant

the authorities' negative treatment of the entire Muslim community. While some inhabitants of his own Malokarachayev district had turned to terrorism - such as Ramazan Borlakov, who reportedly set up an independent medressah (Islamic educational institute) in the settlement of Uchkeken and is now believed to be in Chechnya - Erkenov suggested that they numbered perhaps 10 or 15 out of a population of 43,000. He also stressed to Forum 18 that only a tiny proportion of those fighting for an independent Chechnya - in his estimation a mere one or two per cent - were truly following radical Islamic ideology. Most had gone to fight for money, as there was little local employment in the republic, he said. "They may have said that they were fighting against Russia, but if paid they would have fought against Muslims, or their own relatives. There is nothing holy about that war."

Asked by Forum 18 on 29 September about possible measures to counteract those individuals motivated by radical Islamic ideology, Magomed Erkenov said that the Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of Karachai-Cherkessia and Stavropol Region had already banned circulation of books by Mohammed ibn Abdul-Wahhab, the eighteenth century founder of Wahhabism. "An unschooled person who reads his books will fall into error immediately and be moved to take up arms," he explained. "Wahhabism is the same as radicalism, extremism, terrorism - we must fight it."

Otherwise, both Erkenov and Mufti Berdiyev's assistant Abubekir Kurdzhiyev believed the authorities' attempts to fight Wahhabism to be largely ineffective. Those proposing a law against its proponents "simply want them to be noticed," Kurdzhiyev maintained, adding that closing mosques, as in Kabardino-Balkaria, was no solution either: "Plotters will simply go somewhere else." He also claimed that the authorities' efforts are often insincere due to their fear of confronting the real radicals: "In Karachai we have a saying: 'To see a bear but look for tracks'."

For more background information see Forum 18's Russia religious freedom

survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=116

A printer-friendly map of Russia is available at

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=russi>

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