

4 May 2010

RUSSIA: Muslim community leader kidnapped by Dagestan authorities?

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

Sirazhudin Shafiyev, a Muslim who led negotiations on behalf of the Salafi group in a divided mosque community in 2005 in the southern Russian republic of Dagestan, was abducted in September 2009 and has not been seen since. Family members told Forum 18 News Service they suspect he was seized and killed by the security services in connection with his religious activity, complaining that those who follow their interpretation of Islam are "persecuted". Rasul Gadzhiyev of Dagestan's Ministry for Nationality Policy, Information and External Affairs rejects such allegations of kidnapping and murder, telling Forum 18 "no one is going to pursue you if you haven't committed a crime prosecutable by law." Yet the authorities admit maintaining lists of suspected "Wahhabis". Even Dagestan's state-backed Muslim Spiritual Directorate objects to the lists. Its spokesman complained to Forum 18 that anyone who attends a mosque morning and evening "goes on a police list".

Last seen on 8 September 2009, Sirazhudin Shafiyev was abducted and killed by the security services in connection with his religious activity, his two younger brothers suspect. "Our whole family professes the kind of Islam there is in the normal, civilised world, which there was at all times starting with the Prophet Mohammed," Abumuslim and Mogamed Shafiyev explained to Forum 18 News Service in Russia's oldest and southernmost city of Derbent on 17 April. "For this we are persecuted."

The brothers have no evidence that the authorities were involved in Sirazhudin's disappearance. Witnesses say he was dragged from his car after dropping his children at kindergarten on the morning of 8 September. Viewed by Forum 18, a photograph of the incident shows two attackers in black, their faces obscured by balaclavas.

The Shafiyevs point out, however, that while only a handful of people knew Sirazhudin had visited an imam in Izberbash further up the Caspian Sea coast from Derbent on the evening of 7 September with passports and money from four pilgrims planning to go on the haj pilgrimage to Mecca, on 9 September counterterrorist police arrived at the Izberbash mosque demanding the passports and money.

The brothers also claim law enforcement agents later told them informally that Sirazhudin's body would have been returned had the family not kicked up a fuss. Relatives and hundreds of protesters blocked major Derbent roads on the day Sirazhudin disappeared, insisting prosecutors investigate. "And how can they return the body of someone they killed if there is an official criminal investigation open under kidnap?"

Dismissing complaints from opposition Muslims about kidnap and extermination on 22 April was Rasul Gadzhiyev, departmental head of Dagestan's Ministry for Nationality Policy, Information and External Affairs. "Of course they try to blame the state and say it is opposing and persecuting them," he told Forum 18 in the republic's capital, Makhachkala. "But no one is going to pursue you if you haven't committed a crime prosecutable by law."

Trouble follows mosque leadership election

Like other Salafis – advocates of what they regard as a pure form of Islam as practised by the earliest Muslims – the Shafiyevs worshipped at Derbent's eighth-century Juma Mosque unimpeded until 2005. Trouble began, they told Forum 18, when mosque-goers removed their non-Salafi imam by democratic election and installed a young Salafi who had graduated from Egypt's Al-Azhar Islamic University.

A mass brawl at the Mosque on 9 April 2005 was incited by Sufi and Shia Muslims in order to block the election result, the brothers allege. Sirazhudin Shafiyev was chosen in the wake of these events to negotiate for the Salafi side due to his secular education from Voronezh University. He thus became viewed by the authorities as "leader of the extremists", they believe.

Dagestan's tight control of Islam

Dagestan – a republic in Russia's troubled North Caucasus which borders Azerbaijan and Georgia – is highly ethnically diverse.

Most of the population is of Muslim background, the majority of them Sunnis but with a Shia minority.

Imams and others teaching Islam are subject to tight controls in Dagestan. Under a 1999 local law banning Wahhabism – defined only as "extremist" but informally used interchangeably with Salafism – anyone teaching religion must be endorsed by a republican religious organisation. Under Dagestan's 1998 Religion Law, only one such organisation is permitted per confession, and the current Muslim Spiritual Directorate of Dagestan favours Sufism to the exclusion of Salafism (see F18News 25 May 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1449).

The Spiritual Directorate's press secretary, Magomedrasul Omarov maintained to Forum 18 on 21 April that the situation surrounding Derbent's Juma Mosque – which he described as a conflict between Sunni and Shia Muslims – was now resolved, and that both sides were able to worship there in succession. With its extensive library named after Imam Hussein (particularly revered by Shia Muslims), the Mosque appeared under Shia control during Forum 18's visit on 17 April, although few worshippers responded to a Shia call to prayer.

In the wake of the mosque dispute, the Shafiyevs were repeatedly subjected to house searches "for rockets, ballistic missiles, nuclear bombs," Abumuslim joked. Not finding weaponry, law enforcement agents confiscated "ordinary books", he said – including Russian translations of the Koran and hadiths (sayings attributed to the Muslim Prophet Mohammed).

While not formally banned, a list of Islamic literature "not recommended" and termed "Wahhabi" by the Spiritual Directorate includes Russian translations of the Koran and other titles widely on sale elsewhere in Russia (see F18News 26 May 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1450).

"Wahhabi lists"

According to the Shafiyev brothers, other Salafis were also targeted with the aid of lists drawn up by police and, they suspect, the religious establishment: "That Spiritual Directorate is a branch of the FSB [security service]! Everyone knows that."

Muslims in the North Caucasus republic of Kabardino-Balkaria have similarly told Forum 18 that the names of those controversially detained or wanted for extremist activity at this time were culled from police records of regular mosque-goers, or "Wahhabi lists" (see F18News 20 August 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1173).

The Spiritual Directorate's press secretary shared the Shafiyevs' criticism of the practice of adding devout Muslims to "Wahhabi lists", however. "Every policeman started forming his own criteria. Someone wears a tubeteika [cap commonly worn by Turkic Muslim men] or goes to mosque morning and evening and he goes on a police list," Magomedrasul Omarov remarked to Forum 18. "Should he be persecuted for looking different? Of course not. The people resented this."

Gadzhiyev of the Ministry for Nationality Policy, Information and External Affairs insisted to Forum 18 that the state plays "absolutely no role" in the Spiritual Directorate's activity.

Authorities admit maintaining lists

The law enforcement agencies acknowledge maintaining lists of suspected Wahhabis. In a compilation of papers from a Dagestan government conference on preventing religious-political extremism held in Makhachkala in May 2009, Derbent's deputy head of administration Dmitry Dunayev refers to police records of 42 "adherents of Wahhabism" in the town: "Their whereabouts and their form of activity are known; they are not engaged in active activity and are within the sights of the law enforcement agencies."

Special attention is paid to the teenage children of such people, Dunayev continues. "These minors are monitored where they study and the corresponding work is carried out with them."

In his 2008 survey of attitudes towards Islam in Dagestan, local sociologist Zaid Abdulagatov cites a September 2005 record of 1,070 "adherents of Wahhabism" in the republic issued by its Department for Fighting Extremism and Criminal Terrorism.

Head of the Oriental Manuscripts Department at the Institute of History, Archaeology and Ethnography of the Dagestan branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Shamil Shikhaliyev described to Forum 18 on 16 April how arbitrary pursuit of Wahhabis relied upon particular dress and mannerisms, similar to reports from Kabardino-Balkaria. Instead of proving that Salafis had fought or aided insurgents, he said, the authorities "embitter them – catch someone with a beard, beat him up, force him to sign a confession and imprison him according to this confession."

Shikhaliyev had heard of cases in which even murids (disciples) of opposition Sufi sheikhs were branded Wahhabis.

He and others Forum 18 spoke to felt that the state's approach had become less sweeping in Dagestan from around 2005, however (see F18News 3 June 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1454).

Traders of western fashion clothing at a Derbent market, Abumuslim and Magomed Shafiyev are of secular appearance, as was Sirazhudin in a photograph they showed to Forum 18.

Salafis treated as terrorists?

The Derbent crackdown forced many Salafis to flee Dagestan, the Shafiyev brothers told Forum 18, and encouraged others to "go into the forest" – or join the insurgency. Still others were imprisoned following what the pair described as "theatre" trials on extremism and other charges. The Shafiyevs and others who remain have feared to attend public mosque since 2005, they said: "Their people [Sufi and Shia Muslims] go to mosque, we would be picked up straight away." "We're all on the list," Abumuslim explained, "even him" - he pointed to his two-year-old son. "In ten years they'll come and take him too."

Salafi communal worship at home is also impossible for fear of raids, the Shafiyevs added. If a group gathers, they explained, the law enforcement agencies are likely to launch an assault on the home in what they would later describe as a successful counterterrorist operation. Abductions and killings are also similarly presented, the brothers maintained, recalling a case in which a postal clerk disappeared from his workplace and his bullet-ridden body – still in smart office clothes – was later returned in camouflage combat clothing many sizes too large and unmarked by bullet holes or even blood.

Law enforcement agents believe Salafis are automatically potential terrorists, Abumuslim explained to Forum 18. "They say it's just a question of time, that if not today then tomorrow you'll take up arms and kill, so we're killing you in advance. They don't want there to be a single Salafi here. That's their aim." (END)

For a personal commentary by Irina Budkina, editor of the <http://www.samstar.ru> Old Believer website, about continuing denial of equality to Russia's religious minorities, see F18News 26 May 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=570.

For more background, see Forum 18's Russia religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1196.

Analysis of the background to Russian policy on "religious extremism" is available in two articles: 'How the battle with "religious extremism" began' (F18News 27 April 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1287 and 'The battle with "religious extremism" - a return to past methods?' (F18News 28 April 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1288).

Reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Russia can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=10>.

A compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be found at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351.

A printer-friendly map of Russia is available at <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=russi>.

If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY