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# Islam, Radicalisation and Identity in the former Soviet Union

CO-EXISTENCE

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After 70 years of state repression of religion, the collapse of the USSR allowed Muslims to re-examine their religious identity. While it is clear that international narratives have had an effect on Islam in post-Soviet countries, assumptions about Muslim political views are widespread, and the notion that increased religious observance in the region equates to increased support for international extremism is one which, although lacking evidence, has been enthusiastically taken up by repressive governments of the region. In November 2014 Chatham House published two reports, one on Russian government policy on Islam within Russia and now Crimea, another on the myths and unknowns of radicalisation in Central Asian post-Soviet countries. Both reports discuss the increasing visibility of religious piety after the fall of the Soviet Union.

The first report, *Transnational Islam in Russia and Crimea* draws out the dynamics of migrants workers moving to urban Russian areas in search of work, causing ethno-social tensions within Russian society and sectarian divisions within Islam itself. Despite the broad spectrum repressive tactics the Russian government takes toward insurgent and transnational Islamic groups, the increasing proportion of 'observant Muslims' is not monolithic, and treating an observant Muslim as a radical Islamist is only likely to radicalise them, increasing Russia's existing problems. This is true especially of the recently annexed Crimea where Muslim groups across the spectrum were, under Ukrainian sovereignty, able to operate with relative freedom. Under Russian rule, Crimean Muslims find themselves constricted by Russian government restrictions.

Assumption of radicalisation without evidence is a dangerous habit for government.

The second report, *The Myth of Post-Soviet Muslim radicalisation in the Central Asian Republics*, concentrates on the deep-seated and pervasive assumption that post-Soviet Central Asian nations have experienced Islamic radicalisation since independence, which should in some ways be considered a lesson for Russian policy towards their own Muslims. This report lays out six myths commonly found in analysis and policy of Muslim dynamics in Central Asian republics, and shows that they lack underlying evidence to support them. The report does not claim to disprove the assumptions, or to assert an alternate truth, but is instead a call for caution and clarity;

the assumption of radicalisation without supporting evidence is a dangerous habit for government, analysts, and media alike.

Chatham House specifically looks at six assumptions commonly found in political policy and analysis. These are:

1. There is a post-Soviet Islamic revival
2. To Islamise is to radicalise
3. Authoritarianism and poverty cause radicalisation
4. Underground Muslim groups are radical
5. Radical Muslim groups are globally networked
6. Political Islam opposes the secular state

The assumptions of Muslim radicalisation are convenient for politicians who fear their opponents and "seek foreign security assistance for their regime's security". Instead, evidence shows that Islam in post-Soviet states is comparatively secular and rooted in culture, tradition, and history; not in ideology and transnational boundaries. This report analyses International Crisis Group reports on post-Soviet Central Asian nations as a case study for the prevalence of these assumptions. This is because the ICG is considered one of the preeminent analysts with the most comprehensive publications on Central Asian security issues, therefore if the assumptions exist in ICG reports, it can be assumed that they are present in less rigorous publications as well.

KEY FINDINGS: 'TRANSNATIONAL ISLAM IN RUSSIA  
AND CRIMEA'

Two recently released reports by Chatham House examine the concept of Islamic 'revival' in post-Soviet states, looking at the validity of common perceptions of the role of transnational Islamist movements in the changing dynamics of religious observance in Central Asia, as well as the impact of the recent crisis in Crimea.

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- Since the opening of culture and religion after the fall of the Soviet Union, there has been a rise in the visual displays of piety among Muslims, now that they are able to express their faith more openly.
- Following the fall of the Soviet Union, there was a flood of Muslim teachers and charitable giving for religious purposes from Muslim countries into Russia. These teachings were not

always compatible with traditional Islam within Russia, causing tensions in some cases as they merge a Muslim identity with a new type of Islamic ideology.

- Internal migration within Russia is increasing ethnic and xenophobic tensions in some cases. Concern about migrants has meant that migration policy is lumped together with terrorism, illegal immigration, crime, and trafficking.
- The existing Muslim institutions in Russia, and now Crimea, are played off against each other by the government, and are pitted against the new groups that are forming in the post-Soviet space.
- Many recruits for new Islamic groups in Russia are young, educated, middle-class students and professionals. They also target women for recruitment and have networks in prisons.
- Crimean Muslims have been opposed to the annexation of Crimea by Russia, and consequently the main Muslim institutions – the Muslim Religious Board of Crimea, which is a Muftiat, and the Mejlis, which is an unregistered by representative body – have been targetted for repression by Russian forces.
- The increased visibility of Muslim piety in some cases in Russia has received broadly negative reactions from Russian society, government, and those Muslims who keep to more traditional Russian Muslim traditions. However, while identifying an 'observant' Muslim can be relatively easy due to their increasingly visible marks of piety, ranging from the wearing of the hijab to lifestyle, food, and celebration choices, the range of observant Muslims is not monolithic and assumptions of radicalisation based on visible markers can be problematic. Russia should ensure that it does not assume radicalisation based merely on the evidence of change. As shown in the report on myths of radicalisation in Central Asian republics; the unknowns far outweigh the evidence on which current analysis has been based.

## KEY FINDINGS: 'THE MYTH OF POST-SOVIET MUSLIM RADICALISATION IN THE CENTRAL ASIAN REPUBLICS'

- There is an assumption that since the fall of the Soviet Union there has been a revival of Islam. There is however less evidence for a revival of faith in the past 20 years, than an increase in the visibility of a continuity of faith. Islam under the Soviet Union was co-opted by the state and manifested as national and secular tradition and culture. It did not however, disappear.
- Another assumption is that a more observant Muslim population is more radical, and potentially supportive of violent extremism. To assume that to be more religious is to be more radical is a logical fallacy. Without much more research into the trends of radicalisation, or lack thereof, "there is no basis to link increased observance of religious ritual to critical attitudes toward the state".
- Authoritarianism and poverty cause radicalisation: this is an assumption that exists even outside the Central Asian nations and is convenient for Western nations and analysts to perpetuate and rely on. There is however not sufficient evidence to link radicalisation with the existence of poverty or authoritarianism. In the previous report for example, the recruits to more observant Muslim groups in Russia were educated and middle class. In Central Asian republics, there is support for extremist political views in Kazakhstan (the wealthiest Central Asian republic) and Kyrgyzstan (the poorest). There is more evidence to support the relationship between political instability and development of extremist, violent political views, than wealth, poverty, or authoritarianism.
- Underground Muslim groups are radical: Central Asian governments are not normally receptive to new or non-institutionalised Muslim groups. This forces violent and non-violent groups underground when they are banned. This does not mean however that all underground groups are radical. This issue is compounded by the fact that there is not an accepted definition of 'radical', which means the term is often applied to

any group that the current political regime considers opposed to it.

- Radical Muslim groups are globally networked: there are individuals within Muslim groups who are connected with transnational Muslim and even jihadi groups (32 of 800 suspects captured and sent to Guantanamo Bay in the first four years of the 'War on Terror' were from former Soviet states). However, none of them were captured in their home countries. The evidence for transnational networks is often based on websites, which are notoriously difficult to confirm authorship of. Instead, members of Muslim groups in Central Asian republics overwhelmingly cite local contexts and concerns, even if the group has transnational presence and individuals from the group have chosen a more external, international perspective.
- Political Islam opposes the secular state: there is an assumed barrier between Islam and secularism, however, survey data from Central Asia shows that this religious-secular divide is often constructed. Sixty-two percent of those who feel that religion influences their behavior significantly simultaneously feel that "religion should concern itself only with the spiritual" and 51 percent of the same group believe that state law should reflect religious law. At first glance these findings are contradictory, however implementing *sharia* does not have significant support in these countries, even while states are seen to act immorally. Muslims appear from survey data to feel instead that reform should be framed in terms of religion as a source of moral authority, a 'religiously shaped secularism' rather than opposition to the existence of the state.

The reports may be read in full [here](http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/field/field_document/20141111TransnationalIslamMunster.pdf) ([http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/field/field\\_document/20141111TransnationalIslamMunster.pdf](http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/field/field_document/20141111TransnationalIslamMunster.pdf)) and [here](http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/field/field_document/20141111PostSovietRadicalizationHeathershawMontgomery.pdf) ([http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/field/field\\_document/20141111PostSovietRadicalizationHeathershawMontgomery.pdf](http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/field/field_document/20141111PostSovietRadicalizationHeathershawMontgomery.pdf)).





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