

# Politically Numb? Russian Muslims' Attitudes Towards Putin's Wars

Wednesday, 1 June, 2022 - 17:30



**Muslims represent the second largest religious group in Russia.** Although divided into separate ethnic groups, based in different regions of the country, and holding different theological views, this group represents a demographic force to be reckoned with in the country. How have Russia's Muslims reacted to Moscow's controversial military intervention in Syria? What might their reaction tell us about Russia's Muslims' attitude vis-à-vis the war in Ukraine?

## Reactions to the intervention in Syria

While there is little reliable quantitative information about Russian Muslims' perception of the Russian military intervention on Bashar al-Assad's side, it has been suggested **that three trends can be identified**: those who **supported Daesh** (and may still support jihadi Islamism), those who **embrace Kremlin policies**, and those who **disapprove of Moscow's siding with Assad**, yet appreciate the necessity to fight Islamic terrorism. The first group is demographically residual: my in-depth observation of Muslim life in the Republic of Tatarstan, including scripturalist-oriented participants (Muslim individuals and groups who strongly adhere to the precepts of Sunnism), revealed that Daesh sympathisers are such a minuscule and marginal fraction that they fail to play any consequential role in grassroots Islamic discourses. At the other end of the spectrum, Muslim advocates of the military intervention channel the official position of state-backed Muftiates, which, being part of the country's governmental apparatus, align with the Kremlin's positions. Muftiates' reputation in the eyes of their nominal constituencies is far from spotless. Still, it would be naïve to underestimate their capability to steer at least some segments of the Muslim public opinion. The "intermediate" position, antagonistic to Daesh yet critical of Moscow's intervention, has been reported in relation to grassroots Muslim activists and finds expression in several Russian-language Islamic media outlets.

These analyses risk underestimating **a fourth trend: the even larger number of people who refrain from taking a position or do not consider the issue a high-priority one**. It has been noted that no "noticeable protests" followed Moscow's intervention in Syria. Moscow's anti-terror legislation and clampdown on free speech certainly played a role in this state of affairs. Criticism of the Syrian operation risks being mistaken for support of terrorism, with potentially dire consequences for the incautious speaker. However, explaining Russian Muslims' lukewarm reaction solely due to top-down suppression would be simplistic. The Syrian situation and, in general, **Moscow's strategy in the MENA region appears to be genuinely low-priority issues for many rank-and-file Muslims**. Such seems to be the case, for example, in the **Republic of Tatarstan** where I conducted ethnographic research among Sunni scripturalists. This lack of engagement is partly due to the "anti-political" effect of the official religious institutions, which endeavour to keep Islamic discourses within limits approved by the central authorities through persuasion and ideological nudging[1]. However, to a significant extent, this is also due to the **quietist character of many Islamic grassroots**

**movements** that have taken root in post-Soviet Tatarstan[iii]. Many of these movements disincentivise an engagement with worldly affairs. As a result, large swathes of observant Muslims harbour limited concerns with state-level political issues and command relatively limited knowledge about Syria and its vicissitudes.

Quantitative data show that **Tatars' perceptions of the military intervention are not substantially different from that of their Russian neighbours**. Tatarstani Muslims (this study does not differentiate between secular Tatars and scripturalists) were only slightly more critical of the Syrian operation than Tatarstani Christians (24 against 18%). The same percentage of Tatars and Russians (23%) endorsed the Kremlin's support of Assad. Fewer Muslims than Christians (18 against 28%) favoured the idea of joining forces with the West, suggesting, on this account, even stronger pro-Kremlin leanings than among their Russian neighbours. Tellingly, however, **most Muslims (about one out of four) had no opinions on the best course of action to follow in the war**. When asked to define the nature of the Syrian events, about 25% of Tatar respondents – vis-à-vis 20% of Tatarstani Russians – saw the conflict in terms of a war against terrorism, fully in line with the Kremlin discourse, and about 15 % as a matter of geopolitical interest. Again, tellingly, the largest share of Muslims (almost 40%) was unsure about the nature of the conflict. Even though surveys on such sensitive topics may be challenging due to participant self-censorship or hesitancy, these figures suggest that most Muslim respondents oscillate between acceptance of the Kremlin's line and lack of active engagement with the issue.

My fieldwork observations corroborate this picture. Even though some “activist” Muslim voices may dislike Assad's regime and resent Moscow's support, very few people in Tatarstan would consider this a policy worth campaigning against. **The overwhelming majority of Tatarstani Muslims, including scripturalists, uncompromisingly oppose violent jihadism and consider Islamist terror groups' extirpation a necessary and worthy cause**. Furthermore, a substantial chunk of the Muslim population seems receptive to arguments about Russia's national interests. Theological arguments in support of the “love for one's country” are usually circulated not only by the state-loyal Muslim organisations but also in settings that can be considered genuine expressions of the Muslim scripturalist-oriented grassroots. Patriotic sentiments, magnified by the conflict with Ukraine

(more on this below) and catalysed by the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the USSR's victory over Nazi Germany just a few months before the Russian intervention in Syria, have found their way into the country's Muslim mainstream.

Meanwhile, **Syria is not just physically remote from Russia's Muslim-majority heartlands but also affectively so**. The mental picture of the MENA region in the eyes of rank-and-file Muslims in Russia is uneven, with some areas blurrier than others<sup>iiii</sup>. Although post-Soviet Muslims are worldlier, more mobile, better connected than their parents and grandparents, and much more likely to identify as a part of the global *ummah*<sup>lv</sup>, this cosmopolitanism selectively mirrors people's values and priorities. For example, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the Emirates are perceived as success stories, models to follow, and desirable travel destinations. The affective proximity of these locales resonates with Tatarstani Muslims' religious preferences, ethno-cultural identifications, fascination with Islamic development, and interest in *halal* business, glamour, and leisure as members of a rising Muslim middle class. By contrast, Damascus "feels" much more remote.

A telling example is Tatar Muslims' weak response to the military campaign compared to the heat that followed a **diplomatic crisis between Moscow and Ankara** in late November 2015, caused by a Turkish aircraft downing a Russian attack jet on the Turkish-Syrian border. This incident sparked a wave of anti-Turkish rhetoric and aggressive measures against Ankara, including shutting Turkish cultural centres across the Russian Federation. Tatarstani Muslims, who mostly identify as a Turkic population, reacted with anguish to the diplomatic escalation – to the point that in Kazan, demonstrators gathered to protest Moscow's measures rather than to express indignation at Turkey's "betrayal" as ethnic Russians did elsewhere. In the wake of that crisis, many of my Tatar respondents – both observant and secular – expressed anxiety and grief over the loss of healthy relations with a country imagined and talked about as a close "friend." This diplomatic crisis proved relatively short-lived, and Moscow's relationship with Ankara thawed over time. The **Russia-Turkish skirmish can thus be ruled as a peripheral episode in Syria's litany of much larger tragedies**; yet, in the eyes of Tatarstani Muslims, **its significance appeared to have been greater than the Syrian military intervention** itself. This episode illustrates the importance of affective engagement – or lack thereof – in defining Muslims' reactions to Moscow policies in the MENA region.

# Reactions to the war against Ukraine

Early observations suggest that a combination of **political quietism at the grassroots level** and **tight ideological control from the top down** also condition Russia's **Muslims' response to the 2022 invasion of Ukraine**. As of the moment of writing, it is extremely difficult to garner sufficiently robust ethnographic or statistical data to obtain a comprehensive picture. Like most segments of Russian society, **Muslims were caught unawares by the decision to invade Ukraine**. Muslims appear to be as disoriented and concerned as their Orthodox Christian neighbours, if perhaps even more keenly aware of the risks of dissent.

State apparatuses permeate civic life in Russia, including its Muslim-majority regions, and condition public conversations. Soon after the invasion, wholly unsurprisingly, propaganda material began to circulate that extols patriotic **unity between Orthodox Christians and Muslims**, standing together ("Ramzan with Allah and Ivan with Christ!") **against the West**. Except for critical-minded individuals who already opposed Kremlin policies (some of whom have left Russia), many of my Muslim interlocutors in Russia reacted to the "special military operation" with silence, minimisation, or roundabout comments conveying unease without expressing open criticism. It is hard to assess to what extent (and in what proportions) Russia's Muslims embrace propaganda narratives, silently reject them, or merely accept them as a fact of life.

Very few among my personal contacts appear to support the "denazification" line actively, but it is currently impossible to turn this anecdotal observation into an actual analytical statement. Some of Russia's Muslim leaders avoid public remarks on the issue and endeavour to use social media to project a "business as usual" narrative; others actively encourage their followers to avoid involvement in worldly affairs and focus on individual spiritual life and family, and community. Moreover, the geopolitical fallout of war has estranged Moscow from the West. Still, **Russia's relations with the Islamic world – so important to the cosmopolitan Muslim constituency – have not soured to a comparable extent**, with Turkey positioning itself as a facilitator for negotiations. The economic fallout

of war has not yet systemically impacted the well-regulated everyday life of scripturalist Muslim communities. However, the effect of sanctions may disrupt many Muslims' middle-class aspirations in the mid- and long-term.

In short, the vague picture that emerges from social media and cautious personal interactions is one in which, again, **most faithful Muslims appear to opt for pragmatic detachment from politics**. Time will tell whether this option will remain viable as the crisis unfolds.

*The writing of this contribution was supported by H2020 Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (grant number 843901); its content reflects the author's views only.*

#### OTHER SOURCES:

[i] Benussi, M. and Sidło K. (2020). Criticism or Compliance? The Syrian Crisis Viewed by Russia's Muslims and MENA Christians. In Lovotti C., Ambrosetti E., Hartwell C., Chmielewska A. (eds.), *Russia in the Middle East and North Africa: Continuity and Change (127-154)*. London/New York: Routledge; Benussi, M. (2021). The golden cage: heritage, (ethnic) Muslimness, and the place of Islam in post-Soviet Tatarstan. *Religion State & Society* 49 (4-5): 314-330.

[ii] Benussi, M. (2020). "Sovereign" Islam and Tatar "Aqīdah": Normative Religious Narratives and Grassroots Criticism amongst Tatarstan's Muslims. *Contemporary Islam* 14: 111-134.

[iii] Benussi, M. and Sidło K. (2020). Criticism or Compliance? The Syrian Crisis Viewed by Russia's Muslims and MENA Christians. In Lovotti C., Ambrosetti E., Hartwell C., Chmielewska A. (eds.), *Russia in the Middle East and North Africa: Continuity and Change (127-154)*. London/New York: Routledge.

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