

Islam and Muslims in Ukraine After the “Revolution of Dignity”: Current Challenges and Perspectives

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INTRODUCTION

Since 1991 Ukraine has been experiencing a steady growth of Islamic religious activity. The present day “Islamic revival” in Ukraine shares many similarities with developments in its neighboring countries in Central and South Europe especially those with indigenous Muslim populations. In fact Islam in Ukraine is developing in a “minority situation”, as Muslim ethnic groups constitute only a very small part of the overall population of the country and despite the presence of a huge indigenous Muslim ethnic group in Ukraine (Crimean Tatars), we should perceive this process in terms of “creating from scratch” rather than reconstruction.

Islam in Ukraine is not developing in a monolithic form. Instead we should regard it as a conglomeration of the recently emerged heterogeneous Islamic localities based on ethnic groups and network structures. Meanwhile, the international networks of Islamic institutions are having a huge impact on the emergence of transnational Muslim communities in Ukraine.

Islamic institutions in Ukraine traditionally demonstrate different levels of political engagement: from apparently neutral to active involvement. Some of them, like the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Ukraine in Kyiv (DUMU) headed by Sheikh Ahmad Tamim, actually stay out of political activities while maintaining strong relations with the Muftiat of Chechnya. At the same time its subsidiary structure in Crimea “Tavrian Muftiat” actively supports pro-Russian secessionist forces there.

Meanwhile the All-Ukrainian Associations of Social Organizations “al-Raid” and the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Ukraine “Unmma”, which are linked to the Federation

of Islamic Organizations in Europe¹, are traditionally more active in the social and political spheres, especially with regard to Middle Eastern politics, the “Arab Spring” and the “Palestinian issue”.

We should consider the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Crimea to be the most politicized among Islamic institutions in Ukraine due to its active role in the process of the Crimean Tatar national revival. This has been permanently contested by the pro-Russian organizations and recently by the new secessionist authorities in Crimea.

The political crisis in Ukraine caused widespread protests in November 2013 –February 2014 known as the “Euro-Revolution” or the “Revolution of Dignity”, which first took place in Kyiv and then in some other regions before President Victor Yanukovych was ultimately removed from power. Various Islamic institutions responded to these events in their own ways and in turn were differently impacted by them.

ISLAM IN MAINLAND UKRAINE

The most important Islamic institutions in mainland Ukraine consolidating a vast part of the Muslim communities are the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Ukraine (DUMU) in Kiev, the Spiritual Center of Muslims of Ukraine (DCMU) in Donetsk, the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Ukraine “Umma” (DUMU “Umma”) in Kiev.

In August 1992 the Spiritual Administration of European and Siberian Part of the Russian Federation (DUMES) approved the establishment of the Main Mukhtasibat Administration of Ukraine and appointed Lebanon-born Ahmad Tamim to the post of imam-mukhtasip

¹ FIOE is an umbrella organization for the Muslim Brotherhood in Europe.

of the Muslims of Ukraine². The process was completed with the establishment of the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Ukraine (DUMU) independently of DUMES in April 1993 headed by Sheikh Ahmad Tamim.

DUMU adheres mostly to the Shafi'i madhab and brings together Muslims of different nationalities, including a significant part of the Dagestan and Chechen diasporas. Moreover, DUMU is closely connected ideologically and organizationally with the transnational Islamic network structure al-Ahbash³. DUMU also has strong ties with the Chechen muftiyat due to the common Shafi'i school and strong presence of the Chechen diaspora in the DUMU community in Kyiv. Sheikh Ahmed Tamim has visited Chechnya several times and Chechen mufti Sultan Hadzhi Mirzaev has been to Kyiv as well. In 2012 both institutions signed a cooperation agreement⁴.

During the "Revolution of Dignity" DUMU stayed away from the protests and remained neutral in their discourses and actions. The Friday sermons (hutba) in the ar-Rahma mosque in Kiev traditionally addressed issues of religious morality and upbringing without reference to the political situation. During the protests Alexander Krivonosov who called

himself "aide to Shaikh Tamin" several times addressed people on Maidan from the stage, but DUMU officially denied his affiliation with them⁵.

In an interview on the 25th of February 2014 Shaikh Tamin reiterated the neutrality of the DUMU: "We have stated our position - we are out of politics and against the fact that someone has used Islam for political purposes"⁶. In November 2014 during a meeting with the speaker of the Parliament Alexander Turchinov, Sheikh Tamim stated that the Muslims of Ukraine by all means try to show that they are full citizens of this country, which has become their second homeland⁷.

By contrast, the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Ukraine "Umma" (DUMU "Umma") has always played a more active role in these processes. Founded in 2008, DUMU "Umma" has strong ties with the All-Ukrainian Associations of Social Organizations "al-Raid" who represents the European branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. Some of its communities are located in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions and in Crimea. The mufti of "Umma" Said Ismagilov himself was a part of the protest movement participating in "Maidan" in Kiev and Donetsk. At the same time he expressed his disapproval of the violent forms of protest⁸.

Said Ismagilov has admitted that since Donetsk was captured by pro-Russian separatists, some of local Muslims and religious leaders left the city. Meanwhile, he noted that there was not significant pressure on the local

2 See: Oleg Yarosh, Denis Brylov, Muslim communities and Islamic network institutions in Ukraine: contesting authorities in shaping of Islamic localities// Muslims in Poland and Eastern Europe: widening the European Discourse on Islam, ed. by Katarzyna Górak-Sosnowska), Warsaw, 2011. – p. 259.

3 In 1930 Shaykh Abd al-Rahman al-Ajuz founded Jam'iyat al-Mashari' al-Khayriyya al-Islamiyya (the Association of Islamic Charitable Projects, AICP). This institution is known as a strong opponent of the fundamentalists and Islamists, such as Salafis and Muslim Brotherhood. It is often named after its spiritual leader Sheikh Abd Allah al-Harari known as "Habashi" (Ethiopian).

4 <http://nbnews.com.ua/news/36275/>.

5 http://umma.ua/ru/news/world/Kto_vistupaet_na_stsene_Evromaydana_ot_musulman_Ukraini/24231.

6 <http://focus.ua/society/297299/>.

7 http://umma.ua/ru/news/ukraine/Turchinov_posetil_DUMU_s_ofitsialnim_vizitom/28133.

8 http://risu.org.ua/ru/index/all_news/state/national_religious_question/55029/.

Muslim communities from so called “Donetsk Peoples Republic” (DNR)⁹, although some attempts were made to create an independent muftiyat of DNR: “Some persons accompanied by the armed men visited mosques in the occupied territories and offered to join a Muslim religious administration in these territories”¹⁰. The Spiritual Center of Muslims of Ukraine (DCMU, established in 1994) was also badly affected by the military confrontation in the Eastern Ukraine, because major part of its communities are located in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions and some Muslim families were forced to leave their houses amid ongoing clashes.

ISLAM IN CRIMEA

The process of religious revival and the re-institutionalization of Islam in Crimea started in the early 1990s. The first Muslim communities in Crimea were officially registered in 1988. In 1990-1991 the Kadiyat of the Muslims of Crimea (KMC) was established under the jurisdiction of the Spiritual Administration of the European and Siberian part of the Russian Federation (DUMES, Ufa) and in 1992 reorganized into an independent Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Crimea (DUMK).

DUMK is the largest Islamic institution in Ukraine and comprises 80% of the total number of Muslim communities in Ukraine. The overwhelming majority of religious organizations of the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Crimea is located in the territory of Crimea and brings together Crimean Tatars, which indicates its regional character and mono-ethnic structure. The main bodies of DUMK are the Kurultay (convention) of the delegates of clergy and Muslim communities

of Crimea, the Plenum of the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Crimea, the Council of ‘Ulama and Mufti¹¹. The Mufti is elected by the Kurultay. An officially declared goal of the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Crimea is “to unite the Crimean Tatar people in the study of religion of Islam”¹².

DUMK until now has had a strong ties with the Mejlis of the Crimean Tatar people, the supreme national representative body. In 1995 the institution of the special representative of the Mejlis in the Muftiat was established to influence religious politics via consultations with the administration of the Mejlis. The current mufti Emirali Ablaev and his deputies have received religious education in Turkey.

Until present the local Islamic institutions, first of all DUMK, have been receiving significant aid from the international Islamic organizations and foundations, in the first place from “Al-Raid” (FIOE) and the Turkish Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) who supported projects on religious education, the building of the new mosques and reconstruction of the old cult-related buildings. Aziz Mahmud Hüdayi Vakfı from the famous Turkish Naqshbandi Shaykh Osman Nuri Topbaş and foundations from Saudi Arabia (Zam-Zam, SAAR Foundation) were also actively present here, but Saudi foundations were forced to leave by the Ukrainian authorities in 2003.

The Islamic activities in Crimea also took place outside the mainstream Islamic institutions in so called “independent communities” or inside communities formally affiliated with DUMK, like those in some Black Sea coastline towns. Some of these communities consolidate local Salafis and Hizb ut-Tahrir followers. Therefore, the DUMU claims to represent

9 <http://www.svoboda.org/content/article/25461709.html>.

10 <http://umma.in.ua/?p=2085>.

11 See: Oleg Yarosh, Denis Brylov, Op. cit. – p. 252 – 265.

12 Ibid. – p. 258.

all Crimean Tatars Muslims and constantly pledges to abandon disagreements and differences in the name of the national unity.

Nowadays though, the authority of the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Crimea over the Crimean Muslim community was actively disputed by other Islamic institutions, namely the Spiritual Center of the Muslims of Crimea (DCMK)¹³.

DUMK and Mejlis successfully opposed the official registration of another Muftiyat in Crimea for several years, but the Spiritual Center of the Muslims of Crimea was ultimately officially registered in 2010. The Center has strong ties with the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Ukraine in Kyiv (DUMU), headed by Sheikh Ahmed Tamin who itself connected ideologically and organizationally with the Islamic network organization al-Ahbash.

During the “Revolution of Dignity” leaders and activists of the Mejlis supported protesters in Kiev. On February 26, day before the armed seizure of buildings the Council of Ministers and the Supreme Council of the Crimean Autonomy (ARC) took place, the Mejlis held a massive rally in support of national unity and the “Revolution of Dignity” in front of the Parliament. The next day, when the governmental buildings were captured by the Russian paratroopers, the Mejlis leader Refat Chubarov called on Crimean Tatars to stay at home, and the Mufti of Muslims of Crimea asked them “not to yield to provocations by

unknown people”. At the same time, the head of the Mejlis did not recognize the forcibly appointed new Crimean government. After that and before the so called “Crimean status referendum” the Mejlis held several rallies against it and called for its boycott.

After the annexation of Crimea, Crimean Tatar religious and political organizations who opposed Mejlis and DUMK such as the Milli Firka and the DCMK gained the upper hand.. Milli Firka sometimes is critical about local Crimean authorities and seeks support from the Federal authorities. Meanwhile, the current vice-speaker of the Crimean Parliament, former vice-chair of Mejlis Remzi Ilyasov, founded a new Crimean Tatar social movement called “Crimea” which is loyal to the local authorities and aims to weaken the political influence of Mejlis¹⁴. On August 22 the DCMK held a convention of the communities and proclaimed the creation of the Tavrian muftiat. This initiative was criticized by the DUMK while Crimean Prime Minister Sergey Aksyonov expressed support for the creation of the parallel muftiat¹⁵.

The Tavrian Muftiat claimed to have support from the influential Russian Muslim leader Talgat Tajuddin, the mufti of the Central Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Russia (CDUM, former DUMES), one of the major Muslim associations in Russia which has friendly relations with Sheikh Ahmed Tamin¹⁶. However, when the DUMK officially addressed him about his position in that case, he officially denied that he supports creation

13 The Spiritual Center of the Muslims of Crimea was established in 2010. The Center linked with the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Ukraine, which itself, according to Denis Brylov, is linked ideologically and organizationally with the Islamic network institution Al-Ahbash. See: Oleg Yarosh, Denis Brylov Muslim communities and Islamic network institutions in Ukraine: contesting authorities in shaping of Islamic localities. – p. 260 – 262.

14 Remzi Ilyasov admits that Mejlis is still supported by 70%-80% of Crimean Tatars. See: <http://www.vz.ru/politics/2014/10/22/711566.print.html>.

15 <http://qha.com.ua/aksenov-tavricheskii-muftiyat-ne-vneset-raskol-sredi-musulman-krima-139655.html>.

16 http://www.ng.ru/facts/2014-09-03/1_muftiat.html.

of the Tavrian Muftiat.

At the same time, another influential Russian Muslim leader Rawil Ğaynetdin, mufti of the Spiritual Administration of the European Part of Russia (DUMER) and head of the collective Islamic representative body the Council of Mufties of Russia, criticized the creation of the Tavrian Muftiat and the position of Talgat Tajuddin and expressed his support to the DUMK. On September 19th he visited Crimea and held a meeting with leaders of the DUMK and local authorities. After the meeting Rawil Ğaynetdin had a briefing with Emirali Ablav where he reinstated his support for the DUMK and claimed the creation of a joint commission of representatives of DUMK and local officials for conflict resolution¹⁷.

The active involvement and positioning of the two most prominent Muslim Russian leaders in the conflict between Islamic organizations in Crimea reflects their longstanding rivalry for supremacy over the Tatar Muslim community in Russia.

The other dangerous challenge for the Crimean Tatars comes from the pro-Russian nationalist organizations, so called Kazaks, and their armed self-defense units, who recently had received an official status. In its recent report "Rights in Retreat. Abuses in Crimea", the HRW accused security forces and self-defense units of unlawful detention, abduction, ill-treatment including the torture and execution of Crimean Tatars and pro-Ukraine activists¹⁸. There were at least 15 cases in which Crimean Tatars or pro-Ukraine activists disappeared, were abducted, or went missing in Crimea since March 2014. Six were subsequently released and two missing persons were found dead.

¹⁷ <http://www.ansar.ru/rfsng/2014/09/15/53261>.

¹⁸ See: www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/crimea1114web.pdf.

In September security forces, FSB and police raided several mosques and Islamic schools in search for "extremist materials", while temporarily detaining and questioning religious teachers and imams. A particularly intrusive search took place at a religious school in the village of Kolchugino in the Simferopol region, Simferopol and Yalta¹⁹.

In September 2014 mufti Emirali Ablav met with prime-minister Sergey Aksyonov. Aksyonov acknowledged that law enforcement sometimes "went overboard" and declared that Crimea residents will be given three additional months to dispose of all literature prohibited by Russian law. The DUMK also made an appeal to Muslims to dispose the prohibited literature in due course. It should also be mentioned that about 7000 Crimean Tatars including supposed followers of Hizb ut-Tahrir have fled Crimea to Ukraine since March 2014.

Since the Russian Federation extended its authority over Crimea, aid from the foreign Islamic institutions could become more problematic because Russian authorities banned activities of the international Islamic donor organizations in 2000, especially those linked to Saudi Arabia, but not exclusively Saudi Arabia. They were accusing them of supporting religious extremism in the Russian Federation. Until now though, some Turkish charitable foundations such as the "Foundation for development of Crimea" founded by the former Turkish President Suleuman Dimerel,

¹⁹ The Federal List of Extremist Materials was introduced by Federal Law "On Combating Extremist Activities" in July 2002. The list, which was first published in 2007 and has been updated regularly and currently includes about 2,500 publications, audio and video materials, and images. Around 25% of those items are widely used by the Islamic community and include no extremist content. Thus they were inappropriately banned.

still operate there²⁰. At the same time, financial support from the official Russian Islamic charitable institution “Foundation for support of the Islamic culture, science and education” may be problematic for the organizations opposed to the current authorities in Crimea.

Recently Turkish foreign minister Mevlut Cavusoglu accused Russia of not meeting its obligations towards Crimean Tatars regarding the official status of the Crimean Tatar language and other cultural rights and quota for Crimean Tatars in the local government²¹.

Since the annexation of Crimea local Islamic institutions have been subjected to the same political context and legal regulations and share common problems with their counterparts in the Russian Federation and contacts between them will undoubtedly intensify. I addressed this issue to my Russian colleagues who are experts on Islam in North Caucasus (Dr. Akhmet Yarlykapov) and Tatarstan (asked not to be named). Dr. Yarlykapov claimed that the DUMK’s loyalty to the federal authorities cannot guarantee its support in conflict with the local administration, because in the regions of the Russian Federation such as Stavropol where Muslims are in minority, local authorities in problematic situations always acts in the interests of the Russian majority and the federal institutions never intervene in these conflicts.

The other colleague expressed an assumption that closer relations between Crimea and Tatarstan in perspective will allow Tatar businessmen to invest in cultural and religious project in Crimea, but this is not on the table right now due to the economic crisis in Rus-

sia. On the other side, federal authorities don’t have a clear vision how to deal with Crimean Tatars and their political and religious institutions. Thus they shift all responsibility to Aksyonov and his associates who are under the patronage of the “party of war” in the Kremlin. Therefore, if the DUMK becomes more loyal to the local authorities, they will use this as an opportunity to weaken and even destroy them.

Thus, the current situation in Crimea is characterized, on the one hand, by the diminished political influence of Mejlis, a reduction of activities of Hizb ut-Tahrir and the Muslim Brotherhood. On the other hand, the DUMK has managed to minimize the splitting of the Muslim Umma in Crimea so far and could be able to strengthen its grip on communities previously controlled by Hizb ut-Tahrir. The future of Islamic institutions in Crimea depends on how successful the DUMK will be in its attempts to mediate between the interests of the Crimean Tatar community, Mejlis and politics of the local and federal authorities.

CONCLUSION

The “Revolution of Dignity” affected Islamic institutions in Ukraine to various extents. While taking different stances with regard to the protests, all of them supported the Ukrainian people’s move to democracy, national unity and territorial integrity.

Meanwhile, Muslim communities in Crimea are most significantly affected by the events which followed the “Revolution of Dignity”, namely the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation and the extension of its repressive legislation regarding religious nonconformity to local Muslim institutions.

Therefore we cannot exclude the growth of religious and inter-ethnic tensions in Crimea. In this case, the position of the DUMK as the

²⁰ <http://qha.com.ua/turetskii-fond-razvitiya-krima-organizoval-kurbanbairam-v-simferopole-140372.html>.

²¹ <http://qha.com.ua/mid-turtsii-rossiyane-vipolnila-obeschanie-dannoe-krimskim-tataram-142418.html>.

most influential Islamic institution in Crimea will be crucial. In order to achieve its goals which consist in maintaining the national unity of the Crimean Tatar community and strengthening of their influence inside local Muslim community, the DUMK will mediate between the interests of the Crimean Tatars , Mejlis and politics of the local and federal authorities while trying to secure support from the influential Islamic institutions in Russia.

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