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The MWL in Russia: Four Cities, One Message

Islam & Orthodoxy: Cooperation Not Conflict

SPECIAL: New Zealand – The Intolerability of Intolerance

MAY 2019



Russia & Islam

The Power of Tradition

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MWL in March/April

Highlights of the Month in Review

MARCH 28

The visit of the Muslim World League to Russia—a first-ever trip—and the gathering of the international Islamic conference “Islam: A Message of Mercy & Peace” began on this day at the President Hotel in Moscow, closing in Grozny on March 30. This conference included participants from 43 countries and the MWL highlighted the occasion with a formal resolution restating the fundamental principles of the Islamic faith.

The conference was organized with the support of the Muslim World League, the Russian Academy of Sciences, the Regional Public Fund and the State Fund for the Promotion of Culture, Science and Education. Public, political and religious leaders of the Federal Subjects of Russia participated—including the State Duma, the Federal Council and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The MWL delegation continued its official visit to Russia with meetings in the legendary city of St. Petersburg and Kazan, the capital of the Republic of Tatarstan.

MARCH 28, MOSCOW

Dr. Al-Issa met with the Chairman of the Russian Parliament, Vyacheslav Volodin, in Moscow to discuss the importance of religious tolerance and peaceful coexistence. “The very fact of such a great number of prominent scholars gathering for the event indicates the authority of the region,” said Mr. Volodin.

MARCH 28, MOSCOW

Valentina Matviyenko, Chairwoman of the Federation Council of the Federal Assembly, praised the Muslim World League’s humanitarian role in Russia and around the world. She exchanged traditional gifts with H.E. Sheikh Dr. Al-Issa, noting the similarity of customs shared by Russia

and the Islamic world.

MARCH 28, MOSCOW

H.E. Sheikh Dr. Al-Issa signed a cooperation agreement with the State Fund for the Promotion of Culture, Science and Education in Russia. The agreement promotes moderation and tolerance.

MARCH 28, MOSCOW

On behalf of Salakh-Khadzhi Mezhiyev, the advisor to the Head of the Chechen Republic and Mufti of the Chechen Republic; Turko Daudov, Chechen Deputy Mufti for foreign relations, H.E. Sheikh Dr. Al-Issa, and the honorary delegation of the MWL, met with Mikhail Bogdanov, the special presidential envoy for the Middle East and African countries, the Deputy Russian Foreign Minister, and Konstantin Shuvalov, the Ambassador-at-large of the Russian Foreign Ministry.

Sheikh Dr. Al-Issa met with the Moscow Grand Mufti, Sheikh Ravil Gaynetdin, at the Moscow Cathedral Mosque, informing the Grand Mufti that he is on the list of the 70 most influential people of the Muslim world. Mufti Sheikh Ravil Gaynetdin, Chairman of the Russian Muftis Council and the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of the Russian Federation, has been a member of the Supreme Council of the Muslim World League for more than ten years. In response, the spiritual leader of Russian Muslims expressed his readiness to actively support Dr. Al-Issa in popularizing the true values of Islam, which are goodness, peace, good-neighborliness, mutual respect and humanism. Damir Gizatullin and Rushan Abbyasov, the First Deputy Chairmen of Mufti Sheikh Gaynetdin, as well as Ildar Galejev, the head of the International Department of the Russian Muftis Council, were present.

MARCH 28, MOSCOW

Sergey Ordzhonikidze, the Public Chamber Deputy Secretary, and Albir Krganov, the head of the Spiritual Assembly of Muslims of Russia, met H.E. Sheikh Dr. Al-Issa at the Public Chamber of the Russian Federation. The Deputy Secretary of the Public Chamber drew attention to the work of the Assembly “for harmonization of interethnic and inter-religious relations,” noting that this body is “an important platform for the development of state-confessional relations and for making decisions to improve legislation in the sphere of freedom of conscience and religion.”

MARCH 28, MOSCOW

Grand Mufti Sheikh Nafigulla Shirov of the Republic of Chechnya participated in the international Islamic conference, “Islam: A Message of Mercy and Peace” at the invitation of Dr. Al-Issa.

MARCH 29, GROZNY

In Grozny, the participants in the conference, accompanied by the leader of Chechnya, were invited to a Friday “Namaz,” and H.E. Shiekh Dr. Al-Issa gave a sermon. This event was organized by the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of the Chechen Republic.

MARCH 29, GROZNY

Dr Al-Issa was awarded the highest honor of Muslims of the Caucasus with the medal “For Merit to the Ummah” by the Coordinating Center for Muslims of the North Caucasus.

APRIL 2, GROZNY

A talk show, “Kadryov Path,” was shot in the main office of the Akhmat Kadyrov television and radio station in Grozny. The talk show participants discussed the international Islamic conference, “Islam: A Message Mercy and

Peace.” A round-table talk on that theme was reinforced by memories of the late Akhmad Khadzhi Kadyrov, who brought peace and order to Chechnya following the Koran and Sunnah.

The guests also spoke about the living standards of the country’s population, noting that today the Chechen Republic is one of Russia’s fastest-growing regions, with special attention paid to the spiritual sphere—particularly, the construction of new mosques both in the republic and outside. These participants also spoke of the Khalid Ibn Valid mosque in the Syrian city of Khoms, restored at the expense of the Kadyrov Regional Public Fund.

APRIL 2, GROZNY

The advisor to the Mufti of the Chechen Republic, Salakh Khadzi Mezhiyev, met with the Chairman of the World Council of Muslim Communities, Dr. Ali Rashid Al-Nuami. Dr. Al-Nuami highlighted the major role of the national leader of the Chechen people in transforming the region. Dr. Al-Nuami is also Chairman of the Governing Council of Hedayeh, an international center on countering violent extremism.

APRIL 2, GROZNY

The international publication *Eurasia Review* reports: “The Muslim World League conducted its meetings in key parts of the Russian Federation, including the Chechen capital of Grozny, where the mix of religious and ethnic communities is significant. Organized under the patronage of the Russian government and the presidency of the Chechen Republic, the MWL conference held special significance for both Moscow and Grozny.”

APRIL 3, GROZNY

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas awarded Ramzan Kadyrov the Star of Jerusalem medal. It was presented by the advisor to President Abbas, Dr. Mahmoud Khabbash. President Kadyrov, the leader of the Chechen Republic, confided that he “is ready to sacrifice his life for Jerusalem” and warned against manipulating the Palestinian problem, especially the theme of Jerusalem, and urged everyone to comply with international conventions and laws regulating this issue.

APRIL 3, GROZNY

The advisor to President Ramzan Kadyrov, the President of the Republic of Chechnya, hosted Suleiman Afandi Radzhab, the Mufti of Northern Macedonia, who arrived in the Chechen Republic to participate in the Islamic conference “Islam: a Message of Mercy and Peace.” The guest of honor said that his republic is distinguished by a significant ethnocultural diversity where about 35% of all the residents are Muslim. There are 425 mosques in Macedonia.

APRIL 3, GROZNY

The Mufti of the Chechen Republic, Salakh Khadzhi Mezhiyev met with his Serbian counterpart Mevlad Dudic. The Serbian mufti expressed his appreciation and gratitude to the leader of the Chechen Republic, Ramzan Kadyrov, and to organizers of the international conference “Islam: A Message of Mercy and Peace.” Mufti Dudic noted that “a copy of the Holy Koran written 400 years ago by a Chechen Muslim in Mecca is kept in Serbia.”

APRIL 4, ST. PETERSBURG

H.E. Sheikh Dr Al-Issa’s speech in St. Petersburg on the theme of peace and civilization to the students of the Oriental Studies Department of St. Petersburg State University attracted a large audience. “It is important to oppose the negative things in the first place. Terrorism and extremism are the most pressing problems and we should fight it together,” said Dr. Al-Issa to the students.

APRIL 4, ST. PETERSBURG

The acting governor of St. Petersburg, Alexander Beglov, and H.E. Sheikh Dr Al-Issa met at Smolny, the governor’s residence, to discuss MWL’s visit and message, as well as cooperation on counterterrorism and economic issues. Mr. Beglov said that St. Petersburg would like to develop closer economic relations with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The Kingdom has shown interest in investment in infrastructure projects in the St. Petersburg region, such as development of the Pulkovo Airport. Mr. Beglov and Dr. Al-Issa also discussed the need to join efforts in counterterrorism.

APRIL 5, KAZAN

The president of the Republic of Tatarstan, Rustam Minnikhanov, met with H.E. Dr. Al-Issa as head of the Russia Islamic Strategic Vision Group at the Kazan Kremlin. The Saudi delegation, led by Sheikh Dr. Al-Issa, arrived in Kazan, the capital, as part of his visit April 6-7. The meeting ended with the signing of a cooperation agreement between the MWL and the Spiritual Administration of the Republic of Tatarstan. The Saudi Ambassador to Moscow, Raid bin Khalid Krimli, was also present at the meeting.

“President Kadyrov, the leader of the Chechen Republic, confirmed that he ‘is ready to sacrifice his life for Jerusalem’ and warned against manipulation of the Palestinian problem, especially the theme of Jerusalem, and urged everyone to comply with international conventions and laws regulating this issue.”



H.E. Sheikh Dr. Mohammad Al-Issa with senior attendees at the "Islam, a Message of Mercy and Peace" Conference in Moscow. Photo Credit: MWL

During that meeting at the Governor's Palace of the Kazan Kremlin, the Mufti of Tatarstan, Kamil Samigullin, exchanged views on the issues of Russia's interaction with the Islamic world. President Minnikhanov expressed hope for successful and fruitful cooperation in strengthening global human and spiritual values. Dr. Al-Issa also delivered a lecture "The World of Civilizations" at Kazan Federal University.

APRIL 6, KAZAN

H.E. Sheikh Dr. Al-Issa visited the Bulgarian Islamic Academy in the Republic of Tatarstan. The Saudi delegation led by the Secretary General was welcomed by Daniyar Abdrakhmanov, the rector of the Academy. Dr. Al-Issa spoke about the main challenges that the organization faces, namely, the spread of true Islam, as well as interaction with and respect for representatives of other religions and confessions. Dr. Al-Issa referred to Russia as a model for the whole world during his visit to the Academy.

APRIL 10

H.E. Sheikh Dr. Al-Issa published an essay in the American newsmagazine of the prominent U.S. media channel Fox News. The Secretary General of the MWL wrote, "to build tolerance and promote full national integration, majority and minority bear a responsibility that is, at its core, similar. It starts with embracing diversity" in the world today.



H.E. Sheikh Dr. Al-Issa delivers Friday sermon at the Great Mosque of Chechnya, in Grozny. Photo Credit: MWL

Letter from the Editor

MAY 2019

In the Name of Allah, the Merciful and Compassionate,

Events over the course of March and April exemplify the two fundamental challenges that face the Muslim World League in the administration of its mission and the Islamic world at large in the expression of its faith: the tragedy of intolerance and the triumph of understanding. It is why with the re-launch of our journal starting with this May 2019 issue—part of an ongoing process to deliver more and better coverage for our readers—we mark a milestone in refining the meaning of our message at a time of growing multiethnic conflict, but also of increasing international awareness. In the early afternoon of March 15, in a suburb just outside of Christchurch, New Zealand, a lone young gunman, an individual espousing self-described “ethnonationalist” beliefs typical of the nature of such crimes, opened fire on two mosques during Friday prayers, killing a total of fifty worshippers and injuring fifty others. The Muslim World League was swift to condemn the act, as was the entire civilized world. Of course, we know too well that both the vehement denunciations of violence and the humane, reflexive outpouring of grief for its victims will never prove enough to overcome this kind of terror or to address the complexity of motives behind it. But the MWL also realizes that active engagement dedicated to consistent dialogue and to combating any atmosphere of intolerance is a duty that will always bring about effective, positive results. How unfortunate it was that these killings took place in a beautiful country that consistently over the years has hosted significant exhibits on the glories of Islamic art, including one in Christchurch itself in 2017. It is in this context of working exhaustively to bring communities together that we reflect upon the Christchurch killings in this issue with our Editorial Lead feature: “New Zealand: The Intolerability of Intolerance.” It is our hope you will both learn from it and enjoy it.

— Continued next page

“Islam condemns extremism. The conference participants call on all Muslims to not only prevent those critical phenomena but also to explain their depravity to others. Muslims must observe the traditional values of Islam and rely on the agreement of great scientists and the centuries-old experience of the Ummah, which must follow the straight way.”

—His Excellency Sheikh Dr. Muhammad bin Abdulkarim Al-Issa, Secretary General of the Muslim World League, from his keynote Russia address: “Islam: A Message of Mercy and Peace”

“The Russian Federation attaches great importance to the development of friendly bilateral relations with Muslim countries as well as our ties in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. We have many similar views on many global and regional issues. We stand together for a fair and democratic world order based on the rule of law and freedom from any form of discrimination, diktat or economic and information pressure. Russia and Islamic countries have developed constructive trade, economic, research, technological and cultural cooperation, as well as partner relations in the settlement of local conflicts and crises.”

— Russian President Vladimir Putin in an address to the Russia-Islamic Strategic Group Conference, Republic of Dagestan, November 2018.

“The Muslim World League was swift to condemn the act, as was the entire civilized world. Of course, we know too well that both the vehement denunciations of violence and the humane, reflexive outpouring of grief for its victims will never prove enough to overcome this kind of terror or to address the complexity of motives behind it.”

The incident only consolidated and reinforced our focus on promoting the philosophy of the MWL, which is “Islam: A Message of Mercy and Peace.” That philosophy was the centerpiece of a spectacular week-long visit on the part of the Secretary General of the Muslim World League, His Excellency Dr. Muhammad bin Abdulkarim Al-Issa, and members of his diplomatic corps to Russia. Following a significant meeting in Europe between Sheikh Dr. Al-Issa and M. Gilles de Kerchove, the EU counterterrorism commissioner, the Russia trip was the first of its kind for the League. Comprising a whirlwind tour through four fascinating cities that combined high-level meetings, international conferences, prominent lectures and new cultural and economic agreements, the visit demonstrated how two civilizations—those of Russia and of Islam—can join forces to produce a successful dynamic of social, political and spiritual cohesion. For the MWL, the experience was the triumph of understanding that enlivens our work and keeps us optimistic in the face of so many world struggles.

His Excellency was hosted by top-level Russian and Russian-Chechen dignitaries, the Chief Muftis of Russia/Moscow, as well as the Muftis of Grozny, Kazan and St. Petersburg. He delivered a highly successful lecture to the Oriental Studies Department at the State University of St. Petersburg, an event so popular that faculty and students were given the day off to attend. The trip also included the signing of several agreements for cultural ties, cooperation against terrorism, and new investments with Saudi Arabia. “We think of ourselves as uniquely related to Islam,” said Russian President Vladimir Putin in 2010. The sentiment appears as strong as ever. Despite many difficult eras—using the 1999-2009 war in Chechnya as the primary example—past conflicts have emerged into new levels of cooperation between Russian society and Islamic influence. Balancing 25 million Muslims within its borders, Russia presents a striking tapestry of genuine multiculturalism.

We invite you to enjoy the celebration of this visit in the pages of this month’s Journal. The issue, dedicated to the theme of “Russia and Islam: The Power of Tradition,” offers an inside look at the in-depth meetings between Dr. Al-Issa and his hosts, and explores the cultural diversity of the Russian Federation, the beauty of the country’s magnificent mosques, the success stories of Russian-Muslim personalities, historical articles, and other subjects of interest. It is our hope you will come to appreciate the profundity of this relationship so little known to popular Western audiences and to mainstream media, but cherished by the Muslim communities who have so richly benefited from it.

Peace Be Upon You, Mercy and Blessings.

--The Editors

New Zealand

The Intolerability of Intolerance

"In the face of such evil the global community can answer only with the values of love, harmony and peace."

— H.E. Sheikh Dr. Al-Hssa, on the March 15, 2019, shootings at two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand.

"This tragedy will not alter New Zealand's national harmony and brotherly diversity."

— His Excellency Ambassador James Monroe, New Zealand's Ambassador to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

"Familiarity helps avoid misunderstandings and confusion," stated the advertisement for an exhibit on Islamic art and civilization in Christchurch, New Zealand, in April 2017. Organized by the Canterbury Muslim Community Trust (CMCT), the exhibit was entitled "Multicultural Expressions of Islamic Art," and showcased items and images that decorate the homes of the Muslim community in that city, one that comprises an estimated forty different ethnicities. These included works of calligraphy and examples of a verse from the Koran produced in embroidery, wood carving, intricate textiles, and beautifully decorated metalwork, among many other items.

The people of New Zealand paying their respects and giving their condolences at Al Noor Mosque. Photo Credit: MWL



“The believers, in their mutual kindness, compassion and sympathy, are just like one body. When any part of the body suffers, the whole body feels pain.”

Dr. Jacinda Ardern, Prime Minister of New Zealand, quoting the Prophet Muhammad, (Peace Be Upon Him)

“Islam is integral to every part of a Muslim’s life and makes it beautiful,” noted its organizers, “so [too] Islamic art should be used to make the things of everyday life beautiful.”

The event was no mere one-off for the country: Wellington, the capital of New Zealand, held its first Islamic art exhibit on April 13, 2010. That exhibit followed on the heels of a successful showing in Perth, in Western Australia, a few years prior of “Islamic Art and Patronage: Treasures from Kuwait,” which displayed the magnificent holdings of the Al Sabah collection in that Gulf country. Local newspapers and media outlets like The Australasian Muslim Times took pride in the business success stories of “the Muslims of Oceania,” and regional associations like the Muslim Women’s National Network of Sydney, Australia, and the National Islamic Women’s Council of New Zealand drew record participation stretching from those countries to French Polynesia and Fiji.

In light of such open-minded and generous sentiment, one wonders how a setting filled with such physical and artistic beauty could become, in the space of just two years, the site of the worst massacre in that country’s history. On March 15, a lone gunman opened fire on Muslim worshippers at Friday prayers in attacks at two mosques in the vicinity of Christchurch, the first at the Al Noor Mosque in the suburb of Riccarton and the second at the Linwood Islamic Center minutes away, killing a total of fifty persons and wounding fifty more. Upon condemning the mosque attacks, the MWL, led by H.E. Sheikh Dr. Al-Issa, reached out to victims of the attack for

their humanitarian needs. Meanwhile, the MWL Secretary General undertook an intense round of diplomatic consultations and initiatives aimed at gaining clarity on the situation and at combating the intolerance that has created an intolerable international state of affairs. He hosted the respective ambassadors of New Zealand and Australia to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to his office in Riyadh, during which both diplomats expressed horrified shock and confusion at the developments. “This tragedy will not alter New Zealand’s national harmony and brotherly diversity,” noted Ambassador James Monroe, New Zealand’s Ambassador to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, at the meeting.

One poignant testimony of the unity that came together in the wake of the attacks may be seen in a video of April 9 put out by the MWL and available on Twitter and Facebook. This video features Salwa Mohammad, a Syrian refugee living in New Zealand with her family, whose sons were shot and killed in the shootings. The video, which features background scenes of the multicultural empathy demonstrated by the people of New Zealand for the victims, narrates Salwa’s story as she describes the role of MWL in assisting her in that time of need.

In the days following the attacks and in consultation with dignitaries and world leaders on strategies to reduce their recurrence, Dr. Al-Issa vehemently made it clear that in the face of such evil, the global community “can answer only with the values of love, harmony and peace.” Dr. Al-Issa added in a statement issued by the organization: “The Muslim World

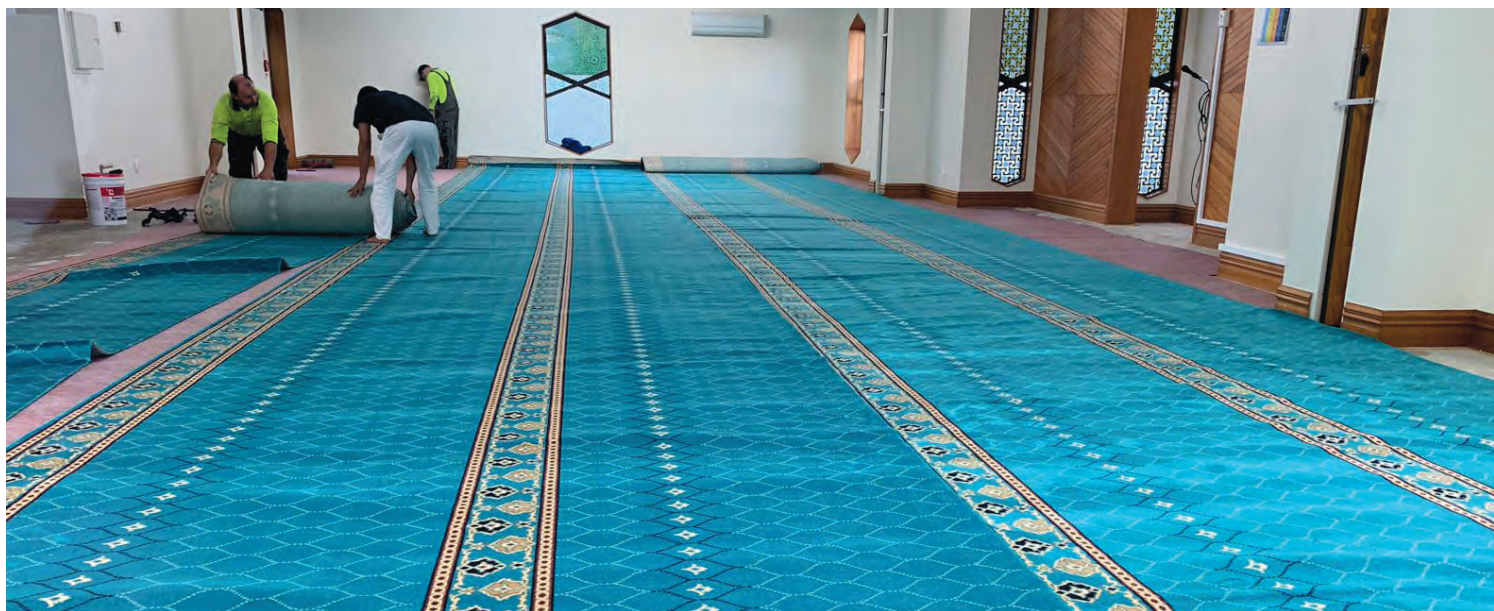
League condemns the attacks in New Zealand's mosques that has claimed the lives of dozens of innocent worshippers and left many others seriously wounded." He continued: "The Muslim World League also expresses its deep grief and condolences for the families, friends and communities of the victims. Terrorist attacks against people of faith are one of the most inhumane and evil forms of incitement and hatred. The barbarity, hatred and ill will of this extremist terrorist act parallels the violent acts of Al-Qaeda and Daesh." The Secretary General further added: "To address the scourge of extremism and Islamophobia, we need governments and faith organizations around the world to work together to encourage religious tolerance and understanding and prevent all forms of incitement and hatred, including all types of hatred leveled against any religion or ethnicity. Without preventive action seeking to foster human and moral values in our younger generations, we risk further cycles of violence. The Muslim World League will work to increase its efforts to work with multi-faith groups in order to create initiatives to promote greater understanding and tolerance."

Victoria University in Wellington noted in a landmark 2011 study that Muslims became the most rapidly growing religious group in New Zealand with the population increasing six-fold between 1991 and 2006. Today, the number of

Muslims in New Zealand according to the 2013 census is 46,149, up 28% from 36,072 from the 2006 census, as reported by Wikipedia, with the majority of New Zealand Muslims belonging to the Sunni faith. The principal concentrations of the Muslim population in the country are found in the major cities of Auckland, Hamilton, Wellington and Christchurch. Although Muslims are a small but rapidly increasing group, there has been relatively little empirical research about their experiences in New Zealand, and media reports have focused on a growing lack of receptivity to Muslim immigrants among the general population.

At the same time, broader developments within that population's acceptance into general society suggest positive results. Victoria University did another study focused on the treatment of Muslim youth in the country, commenting that while young Muslims in New Zealand did indeed face a variety of social, environmental or peer threats to their development, "their pathways to adjustment were rooted within a supportive context that both promoted positive outcomes and diminished risks. The results from this study suggest that there are protective elements for this group, which are embedded in the process of cultural transition. Specifically, the research shows that resilience emerges from the process of managing multiple cultural demands."

Installation of the new prayer rug gifted by MWL to Al Noor Mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand following heinous terrorist attack. Photo Credit: MWL





Support shown for the New Zealand Muslim community. Photo Credit: MWL

A week after the attack, a nationwide moment of silence was observed in New Zealand on Friday, ushered in by the Muslim call to prayer. The prayer and two-minute reflection were broadcast live on national media outlets and filled the silence as an estimated 20,000 people, including Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, gathered a few feet from the Al Noor mosque in the city of Christchurch for Muslim Friday prayers. Mr. Gamal Fouda, an imam who survived the attack at the mosque, said to the press: “Last Friday I stood in this mosque and saw hatred and rage in the eyes of the terrorist, but today from the same place I look out and I see the love and compassion in the eyes of thousands of New Zealanders and human beings from around the globe.”

Speaking to mourners in the crowd, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said, “New Zealand mourns with you. We are one.” Quoting the Prophet Muhammad, [Peace Be Upon Him], she said: “The believers in their mutual kindness, compassion, and sympathy are just like one body. When any part of the body suffers, the whole body feels pain.”

We at the Muslim World League are both spiritually encouraged and morally inspired when members of the international community recognize such values as expressed by Prime Minister Ardern and shared by the MWL—values that are universal and timeless, serving as the principal standard upon which modern, civilized societies live and grow together and as one.

“We need government and faith organizations around the world to work together to encourage religious tolerance and understanding to prevent all forms of incitement and hatred, such that which occurred in New Zealand.”

— His Excellency Ridwaan Jadwat, Ambassador of Australia to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Russia and Islam

The Power of Tradition

"It's our first visit. We are proud of this visit, we are proud of the ties, cultural and civilizational, that we have already established with some of the greater cities. We'll continue to develop them."

—H.E. Sheikh Dr. Muhammad bin Abdulkarim Al-Issa

It may come as a surprise to many that Islam is the second-most widely professed religion in Russia. An estimated 25 million Russians are Muslim, according to the Grand Mufti of Russia, Sheikh Ravil Gaynetdin. The Grand Mufti hosted one of several high-level meetings honoring the Secretary General of the Muslim World League, His Excellency Sheikh Dr. Muhammad bin Abdulkarim Al-Issa, who visited Russia over the course of the international conference "Islam: A Message of Mercy and Peace" in late March through early April. The choice of Russia as host country for the conference was a novel venture for the MWL, one that not only paid respect to the deep historical-cultural relationship that has bonded the two civilizations together, but highlighted the continued strength of this shared des-

tiny as Muslim populations in the country enjoy a greater voice and brighter future there.

It is estimated that the Muslim population will reach one-fifth of the total population of the Russian Federation (approximately 144 million) by 2020. Islam came to Russia in the seventh century, forming high concentrations of states before the formation of a single Russian state. These regions are known today as Tatarstan and Bashkortostan and the republics of the North Caucasus such as Dagestan and Chechnya. Islam was declared the first official religion of a state within Russian borders in 922. This was sixty-six years earlier than the acceptance of Orthodox Christianity as the official religion of Kievan Rus, as the first such Russian state was known.



“You are playing an important humanitarian role and acting as an international spiritual authority worthy of appreciation for its Islamic status. We offer you all the capabilities, services, and assistance to promote the concepts of traditional Integration, and we’ll make every effort to cooperate to eliminate extremism.”

– Ms. Valentina Matviyenko, Chairwoman of the Russian Federation Council

“Followers of our Prophet Muhammad came to Russia twenty-two years after he left earthly life,” Grand Mufti Gaynetdin has explained in interviews. Those followers arrived at the city of Derbent, in Southern Dagestan, the site of the oldest mosque in the country. “The first Adhan, or call to worship, in Russia, was made on the lands of Dagestan,” the Grand Mufti said. He also has pointed out that most Russian Muslims follow the Hanafi school of Islam. Like the founder of the MWL, the late King Faisal, the Grand Mufti emphasizes a united Ummah: “We do not divide Muslims,” he told the Arab press media in March 2018. “For us they are all members of the United Muslim Ummah [community].”



*Meeting Vyacheslav Volodin of the State Duma.
Photo Credit: MWL*

It is this fascinating world that H.E. Sheikh Dr. Al-Issa entered when he and his diplomatic colleagues from the MWL visited four great Russian cities in late March through early April as part of the international Islamic conference “Islam: A Message of Mercy and Peace,” an event held in high esteem by the host cities. The conference started at the President Hotel in Moscow and closed in Grozny, the capital of Chechnya, and included participants from forty-three countries.

During the trip, Dr. Al-Issa was awarded the highest honor of Muslims of the Caucasus with the medal “For Merit to the Ummah” by the Coordinating Center for Muslims of the North Caucasus. Mr. Vyacheslav Volodin, Speaker of the Russian Duma, was present: “The very fact of such a great number of prominent scholars gathering for the event indicates the authority of the region,” he noted. Dr. Al-Issa was received by the Grand Mufti (the highest-ranking member of the Islamic community and legal scholar) of Moscow/Russia, Ravil Gaynetdin, who is also the head of the Supreme Council of Muftis; the Grand Mufti of Chechnya, Salah Mezhniev; and the muftis of St. Petersburg and Kazan, Ravil Pancheev and Kamil Samigullin, respectively. Dr. Al-Issa also took part in appreciating Russian culture as well, with a high-level tour of the famous Hermitage Museum of St. Petersburg and the occasion to speak to a packed audience of students and faculty at St. Petersburg State University, one of the world’s great institutions.

The conference was organized with support from the Muslim World League, the Russian Academy of Sciences, the Regional Public Fund named for Ahmad Kadyrov, and the Fund for the Promotion of Islamic Culture, Science and Education.

It has not been an easy historical road for Russia and Islam. The tumultuous journey has ranged from forcible conversions of Muslims under the legendary Czar Ivan the Terrible in the 16th century to great tolerance and granting of political power to Muslims under Catherine the Great in the 18th. It has experienced World War I Russian princes fighting side by side with Muslim chieftains from Tatarstan against the Bolshevik takeover of the country, only to be followed by the severe persecution of Muslims and their attempted physical and cultural eradication by the Soviet terror regime. It has moved on to the flourishing of liberalization and the building of mosques in the post-communist period only to enter a phase of prolonged, anguished civil conflict during the two Chechen wars in the 2000s. With God's grace this fighting has not only ended but the Chechen Republic enjoys stability, strong autonomy and status within the Russian Federation, as does the general Muslim population overall. Russian Federal Law (1997) states that Islam together with Christianity, Judaism and Buddhism, "constitutes an integral part of the historical heritage of the peoples of Russia."

The introduction to that law emphasizes that the government "has respect for" Islam equally with other traditional religions of Russia. In 2009, the predominantly Muslim city of Kazan, the capital of Tatarstan, was officially named the "third city of Russia" by President Putin.

As the Russian leader noted at a conference in November 2018: "The present day laws of the Russian Federation are the most favorable for Muslims ever in the history of our country as they ensure freedom of faith and legal equality with the rest of citizens."

"The government statutorily guarantees not only the freedom of individual and collective exercise

of religion but also the participation of representatives of Muslim communities in discussions of policy decisions affecting the interest of the faithful."

Today, there are three federal centers for the management of Muslim religious affairs in Russia variously interpreted in name but in general referred to as: the Council of Muftis of Russia (Moscow); the Muslim Spiritual Authority (in Ufa) and the Muslim Spiritual Authority in the Caucasus (the coordination center for the concentrated Muslim population of the North Caucasus).

Russian Christian culture and Islam have persisted together in an extraordinary history of intertwined cultures and interrelated destinies over the centuries, demonstrating a remarkable respect for each other's traditions and increasing mutual understanding. This first-ever visit by the MWL to the country was an all-out triumph of such spirit.



"The present day laws of the Russian Federation are the most favorable for Muslims ever in the history of our country as they ensure freedom of faith and legal equality with the rest of citizens."

— Russian President Vladimir Putin

Main Muslim Population Centers in the Russian Federation outside Moscow and Saint Petersburg: The North Caucasus (Chechnya, Dagestan) and Tatarstan (the Volga River Basin). Shown, respectively, below:



Left, the North Caucasus; Right, Tatarstan or the Volga Basin, southwest Russia.
Photo Credits: Wikipedia (North Caucasus and www.aboutkazan.com, Tatarstan)

Legal Guarantees for the Muslim Community of the Russian Federation

The government of the Russian Federation guarantees the freedom of religion for Muslims in the practice of their faith, included as follows:

- Performance of collective religious rituals and ceremonies and holding of festive events in the months sacred to Muslims
- Creation of religious communities, organizations and centers
- Ownership of religious facilities
- Free religious education for children and adults
- Establishment of scientific, educational, cultural and outreach institutions and centers
- Publication, export, import and distribution of religious literature, periodicals, video and audio products, devotional articles, preaching and awareness-raising efforts online
- International contacts and free of the Russian faithful for religious education and hajj
- Engagement in charity activities
- Conditions for healthy leisure of Muslim families

MWL in Russia

Moscow, Grozny, Kazan, St. Petersburg: MWL Reaches Hearts & Minds

“The problem is not limited to the narrative of this tragedy [of extremism], which has damaged the reputation of the Islamic nation, but extends to every person who was privileged with extensive knowledge in Islamic sciences yet did not fulfill his duty in combating the wrongful ideology, especially in dismantling its structure... We do not exaggerate when we say the amount of carelessness, sedition and misguidance is proportionate to the amount of the scholars’ failure, and part of this failure is a lack of addressing the misconceptions and fabricated concepts about Islam.”

—His Excellency, Sheikh Dr. Muhammad bin Abdulkarim Al-Issa, Secretary General of the Muslim World League, Sermon at the Great Mosque of Chechnya, March 29, 2019.

“Muslim World League Makes History with Moscow Summit” trumpeted the headline of Arab News on March 30th. The statement was no exaggeration: For the first time since the founding of MWL, Russia was selected as the site of a major international conference hosted by that organization. The reason, according to MWL Secretary General Sheik Dr. Mohammad Al-Issa, was that the country “has been a model of religious and ethnic harmony in recent years.” This mood of understanding and tolerance within Russia with regard to that country’s own Muslim communities has made news not just in the Arab press. As commented on by the widely-circulated U.S. political magazine The Atlantic in January of this year: “A little-noticed trend is Moscow’s focus on promoting politically pacific Islam, which has coincided with an aggressive push by certain Arab countries to combat Islamism.”

Over the course of a week-long trip centered upon a three-day conference entitled “Islam: A Message of Mercy and Peace,” the history-making visit established the MWL as an influential voice to make the ideals of the Islamic faith the center of the day-to-day lives as well as future generations of Muslims—in the Russian Federation and internationally. Received by both top-level Russian officials and the spiritual

Top from left: Great Cathedral Mosque, Moscow. “Heart of Chechnya” Mosque, Grozny; Bottom from left: Great Mosque, St. Petersburg; Kazan, Great Mosque by night. Photo Credits: Wikipedia





H.E. Sheikh Dr. Al-Issa meeting with Russian leadership. Photo Credit: MWL

leaders of the country's centuries-old Islamic communities, H.E. Sheikh Dr. Al-Issa spearheaded an exhaustive tour through four magnificent and diverse cities combining diplomatic outreach, cultural bridge-building, scholarly immersion and geostrategic (counterterrorism, economic ties) dialogue. The spiritual purpose of the trip—to deliver the message of Mercy and Peace as the expressed soul of the Islamic faith—was the peak highlight of this inaugural occasion. Centered primarily in Moscow and in Grozny, the capital of the Republic of Chechnya, and attended by representatives from forty-three countries, the conference comprised six main sessions. These ranged from such topics as “Russian Muslims and the Community of Peace” to “Terrorism and Extremism” and included a panel discussion on how to encourage moderation. The final session, entitled “Muslims and Civilizational Dialogue,” took place exclusively in Chechnya, in honor of the generous hospitality and support extended by that republic to the MWL. Dr. Al-Issa also noted Saudi Arabia's efforts to combat terrorism, making special reference to the ongoing critical need to counter terrorist organizations targeting youth through social media.

MOSCOW

- H.E. Sheikh Dr. Al-Issa and the Speaker of the Russian Parliament, Vyacheslav Volodin, met to discuss topics relating to the support of dialogue among followers of different religions and civilizations, boosting cultural contacts and exchanges between the Muslim world and Russia, and promoting the role of prominent religious leaders in encouraging positive integration.
- Speaker Volodin praised the leadership of the MWL for “leading a broad global movement



At the opening of “Islam: A Message of Mercy & Peace” in Moscow, March 28. Photo Credit: MWL

toward promoting universal harmony” and made reference to the organization’s influential religious power on the global scale.

- H.E. Sheikh Dr. Al-Issa held a meeting with the president of the Russian People’s Council, Sergei Ordzhonikidze.
- Ms. Valentina Matviyenko, Chairwoman of the Federation Council of the Russian Federal Assembly, hosted H.E. Sheikh Dr. Al-Issa and referred to the importance of the conference “Islam: A Message of Mercy and Peace,” noting: “Traditional Islam is an important part of the Russian cultural heritage and a millions-strong community is part of the Russian people.”
- The meeting was attended by the Chair of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, Konstantin Kosachev; the Chair of the Committee on House Rules Suleiman Geremeyev; the Deputy Chairman of the State Duma (parliament) Committee on Religious Organizations Selim Khanov; the Deputy Chairman of the Chechen Republic, Bekkhan Taimaskhanov; the Mufti of the Chechen Republic, Salakh Mezhiyev; and the deputy Mufti, Turko Daudov.

AGREEMENT WITH ISLAMIC FUND SIGNED:

- While in Moscow, Dr. Al-Issa signed a cooperation agreement between the MWL and Moscow’s Fund for the Promotion of Islamic Culture, Science and Education, one focused on mutual efforts in tackling extremism, aggression and hostility among religions, races and ideologies and addressing the interaction between Muslims and Islamic organizations in Russia and Muslim-majority countries.
- In stressing measures to promote security, the two parties agreed to an information exchange on the activities of scientific centers, cultural forums and websites. As reported by *Arab News*, the Fund “will act as a mediator for the MWL’s charity work in Russia with Islamic organizations and institutions.”



With Speaker of the Duma (parliament) Vyacheslav Volodin. Photo Credit: MWL



Meeting with Ms. Valentina Matviyenko Chairwoman of the Federation Council. Photo Credit: MWL



“Traditional Islam is an important part of the Russian cultural heritage, and a millions-strong community is part of the Russian people.”

— Ms. Valentina Matviyenko, Chairwoman of the Federation Council



A visit to the Great Cathedral Mosque in Moscow hosted by Grand Mufti Sheikh Ravil Gaynetdin, Chairman of the Supreme Council of Muftis. Photo Credit: MWL

- That fund works in tandem with the Russian-Islamic Strategic Vision Group, founded in Moscow in 2006. President Vladimir Putin, in a keynote speech to that group last November, said the Islamic world could “fully count” on Russia’s help and support. “We are ready to boost cooperation with our partners in confronting terrorist forces as well as in searching for ways to peacefully resolve regional crises,” President Putin stated in his address.

MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING AGAINST EXTREMISM

- At the meeting with the Russian People’s Council, Sergei Ordzhonikidze, the MWL and representatives of the Russian Federation, signed a memorandum of understanding to share their experiences in the fight against extremist ideologies, the promotion of interreligious dialogue and coexistence and the implementation of joint projects to achieve shared goals.
- They also stressed the pure and peaceful values of Islam and rejected all forms of extremism and Islamophobia. The meeting was attended by the Russian Deputy Chairman of the Committee for the Development of Agriculture, Aygun Memedov, the Chairman of the Committee on the Normalization of Relations

Muslim worshippers filled the Friday “Namaz” sermon led by Dr. Al-Issa at the Great Mosque, Grozny March 29, 2019. Photo Credit: MWL



Between Nationalities and Religions, Sheikh Albert Karganov; and also the Mufti of Moscow and the Khanti-Mansisk Region in Siberia, Sheikh Tahir Samatov.

superficial knowledge, which is neither firm nor based on the teachings of scholars and, thus, had the nerve to declare other believers as non-believers (takfir), fueling great sedition.”

GROZNY

- The fifth session of the conference “Islam: A Message of Mercy and Peace” was held in Grozny, which held special significance for both Moscow and the Chechen capital, especially as Russian officials in Moscow underscored their conviction that “Islam is an integral part of the country’s culture.”
- The foundations of religious and ethnic relations in Moscow’s relationship with the Islamic world were discussed between Dr. Al-Issa and Ramzan Kadyrov, the President of Chechnya and descendant of an eminent family of the region. Dr. Al-Issa was awarded the highest honor of Muslims of the Caucasus with the medal “For Merit to the Ummah” by the Coordinating Center for Muslims of the North Caucasus.
- Prior to the commencement of the conference and meetings, participants of the session were generously invited to a “Namaz” on Friday, March 29, at the Great Mosque of Chechnya, a spectacular building known as “the Heart of Chechnya.” H.E. Sheikh Dr. Al-Issa delivered a powerful sermon that was attended by the Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov, senior muftis and scholars, and a large gathering of worshippers.
- Over the course of the powerful sermon, Dr. Al-Issa commented that the Islamic nation “has endured the negative and dangerous impact of classification and exclusion, including takfir (non-believers).”
- Dr. Al-Issa spoke vehemently against the fact that “there are young men who, in their diversion, got caught up in the illusion of their



Not limited to Muslims, Dr. Al-Issa’s message attracted all faiths. Photo Credit: MWL



With the Governor of St. Petersburg Alexander Beglov. Photo Credit: MWL



H.E. Sheikh Dr. Al-Issa speaking at St. Petersburg State University. Photo Credit: Arab News

Excerpt of Sermon by H.E. Dr. Al-Issa at the Great Mosque of Chechnya, March 29, 2019

“Every time one sedition dies, another rises, revealing its horns in the name of Islam. It believes no one is right except its prodigal followers. Not only that, but it takes upon itself to fight all others, after having declared all the people on earth as non-believers. And, similar to those are people who monopolized righteousness in place of discretion and claimed that people were denied access to the truth except through them.”

“The problem is not limited to the narrative of this tragedy [of extremism], which has damaged the reputation of the Islamic nation, but extends to every person who was privileged with extensive knowledge in Islamic sciences yet did not fulfill his duty in combating the wrongful ideology, especially in dismantling its structure. This ideology was not based on a military or political entity, as you know, but on misguided

concepts that exploited the passion for religion in youth who lack knowledge and wisdom. We do not exaggerate when we say the amount of carelessness, sedition and misguidance is proportionate to the amount of the scholars’ failure, and part of this failure is a lack of addressing the misconceptions and fabricated concepts about Islam.”

“The purpose of Shari’a Law is to establish mercy and tolerance, not difficulty and hardship. “Prophet Muhammad, Peace Be Upon Him, had delivered the message, fulfill his mandate, advised the [Islamic] nation, strived for God as he ought to, invited [mankind] to the way of God with wisdom and fair preaching, did not assault anyone, and did not force anyone to follow his religion. There is no compulsion in religion.”

“Adopting justice, values and positive openness with the skills of communication and foresight leads to civilized leadership. Building a national personality with enlightened vision is a basis of leadership and the solution to many problems of nations and states. Spiritual values are often applied in words but not in honest actions.”

– H.E. Sheikh Dr. Al-Issa in St. Petersburg

ST. PETERSBURG

- The visit to Russia continued to the country’s most breathtaking city, St. Petersburg, and a compelling address by Dr. Al-Issa to packed attendance of the Oriental Studies Division of the St. Petersburg State University, the alma mater of Russian personalities from Vladimir Lenin to President Vladimir Puti..
- Speaking before Prof. Nikolay Kropachev, Rector of the University, along with teaching staff, academics, researchers and students, Dr. Al-Issa highlighted the importance of civilized communication between countries and peoples for rapprochement, understanding and exchange, to eliminate “negative barriers and misconceptions usually found in the absence of dialogue,” and for political leaders to show “enlightened vision” as they seek solutions to national and global issues.
- The Governor of St. Petersburg, Dr. Alexander Beglov, then welcomed the Secretary-General. They discussed means of boosting cooperation to consolidate concepts of tolerance, coexistence, and peace. Following the meeting, Beglov hailed Dr. Al-Issa’s lecture at St. Petersburg State University and the subjects the latter addressed. Dr. Beglov also commended the importance of MWL’s presence in the capital of culture, St. Petersburg, to activate more inter-related meetings to achieve common goals.



A visit to the spectacular Hermitage Museum. Photo Credit: MWL

From the Address at St. Petersburg State University by MWL Secretary General Sheikh Dr. Al-Issa

“Human beings share many values. In order to survive and stay healthy, civilizations need to rely on justice and foresight, using the skills of management, communication and respect for common law.”

“Civilizations are eroded if they go against the principles of common humanitarian law.”

“Adopting justice, values and positive openness with the skills of communication and foresight leads to civilized leadership. Building a national personality with enlightened vision is a basis of leadership and the solution to many of nations’ and states’ problems. Spiritual values are often applied in words but not in honest actions.”

“If media dominance is lacking values, it will result in fact-falsifying and brainwashing. Real power today no longer relies on solid power solely but also on soft power, which is often a decisive element.”

“Russia is an open civilization. The country supports houses of worship as part of its national cultural heritage, while other secular nations are drowning in separating the spiritual and physical worlds.”

— As translated in *Arab News*, April 6, 2019

- The Mufti of the St. Petersburg mosque, Dr. Ravil Pancheev, also welcomed Dr. Al-Issa and presented a tour of the mosque—considered by many to be the most beautiful in Russia. When opened in 1913, it was the largest mosque in Europe outside Turkey and modeled by a Russian architect after the tomb of Tamerlane in Samarkand. Its construction was completed by 1921.
- Dr. Pancheev gave a brief history of the Muslims of St Petersburg, while emphasizing the need for the development of bilateral ties in the area of education and the development of spiritual relations between Russia and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Dr. Al-Issa was also given a tour of the Hermitage, one of the world’s grandest museums and home to one of the world’s greatest collections of Islamic art.

KAZAN

- The last stop on the trip from April 6th-7th was the historic city of Kazan, the capital of the Republic of Tatarstan, and, by official decree in 2009, the “Third City” of Russia after Moscow and St. Petersburg.
- Dr. Al-Issa, along with a separate delegation from Saudi Arabia, met Tatarstan President Rustam Minnikhanov at the stunning Kremlin of Kazan as part of a working visit April 6-7. The Saudi Ambassador to Moscow, His Excellency Raid bin Khalid Krimli, was also present at the meeting.

AGREEMENTS SIGNED IN KAZAN

- In addition to President Minnikhanov praising Dr. Al-Issa’s efforts in the promotion of moderate Islam, the meeting ended with the signing of a cooperation agreement between

the MWL and the spiritual authority of the Republic of Tatarstan.

- Dr. Al-Issa and the Grand Mufti of Tatarstan, Kamil Samegillin, renowned author of Islam and the Tatars, signed the landmark agreement to cooperate in promoting moderate Islam, its principles of tolerance and coexistence, and in combating prejudice against and misinterpretation of Islam.
- Once again, the nature of the agreement brought together the best of two worlds. The Grand Mufti signed on behalf of the Tatar Religious Administration of Muslims, whose role it is to teach Tatar Muslims about their religion and promote the culture of moderate Islam under the aegis of the Russian state. The foundation of the agreement itself was based upon the MWL's world-renowned role

in building bridges between cultures, religions and ethnic groups.

- In addition, the two parties also agreed to coordinate academic research and to organize competitions for students to recite the Koran and the Prophet Muhammad's Sunnah from memory.

KAZAN FEDERAL UNIVERSITY ADDRESS AND VISIT TO THE BULGARIAN ISLAMIC ACADEMY

- During his visit in Kazan, H.E. Sheikh Dr. Al-Issa addressed a packed audience at the world-renowned Kazan Federal University to deliver an address: "The World of Civilizations."
- The university employs 11,000 people, 4,000 of whom are academics. It has 47,000

H.E. Sheikh Dr. Al-Issa being warmly welcomed by Tatarstan president Rustam Minnikhanov and entourage. Photo Credit: MWL





H.E. Sheikh Dr. Al-Issa giving lecture at the Bulgarian Islamic Academy. Photo Credit: MWL

students, one-third of whom are from Muslim countries. The university has a center for Islamic studies, which seeks to promote Islamic culture and train scholars. The center also has 13,000 manuscripts, 5,000 of which are in Arabic.

- Dr. Al-Issa stated that cultural communication was of the utmost importance, as were conversations about religious and national diversity, especially in countries of different faiths and ethnicities. Excerpts from the speech included these powerful statements from the Secretary General: “Mankind has no other option to achieve harmony and peace but to fully understand the inevitability of differences and diversity, and then cooperate through similarities, of which 10 percent is enough, we believe, to achieve world peace inside countries and between them.”
- The Saudi Press Agency reported that Dr. Al-Issa said the MWL endeavored to promote the true version of Islam and counter extremist ideologies falsely attributed to Islam, as well as other forms of extremism, especially the concepts of the extreme right in Western countries.
- “The MWL also aims to extend bridges of communication and dialogue to followers of other religions and cultures, to partner with them and provide initiatives that serve common goals, in addition to extending bridges of support to everyone, regardless of religion, race or color. Even though Muslims are proud of their religious affiliation, they know that this does not conflict with their national identity.”
- “In fact, Muslims know that this national affiliation, which seeks good for all, is a key element for achieving harmony between their religious and national identities and that extremist ideas contradict these just concepts.”
- H.E. Sheikh Dr. Al-Issa also visited the Bulgarian Islamic Academy and was welcomed by Daniyar Abdrakhmanov, the rector of the Academy. The Secretary General of the Muslim World League spoke about the main challenges that the organization faces, namely, the spread of true Islam and interaction with respect for representatives of other religions and confessions. Dr. Al-Issa, the Secretary

General of the Muslim World League, called Russia a model for the entire world.

KAZAN: THE “THIRD CITY” OF RUSSIA

- Kazan, the capital of the Republic of Tatarstan, has the largest indigenous Muslim population in the Russian Federation.
- Kazan is the largest city of the Republic of Tatarstan. It is the sixth most populous city in Russia. The Kazan Kremlin is world heritage

site. In April 2009 the Russia patent office granted Kazan the right to refer to itself as the “Third Capital of Russia,” and in 2009 it was chosen as the sports capital of Russia.

- Tatarstan is one of the most economically developed regions of Russia and a main source of wealth oil.
- For the first time since Ivan the Terrible conquered the territory in 1552, the Kremlin of Kazan houses a magnificent mosque whose minarets vie with the domes of the Orthodox churches seen around the city.



Addressing a full house at the beautiful Kazan Federal University. Photo Credit: MWL



GROZNY, THEN (2006) & NOW (2019)



Grozny Then (2016) Photo Credit: Wikipedia, Grozny Now (2019) Photo Credit: Shutterstock

The Chechnya Report

MWL Makes Inroads, Marks Influence

“Saudi Arabia’s well-being, development and security are very important for us and for all Muslims in the world. I have been convinced that Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman is the master of his word. I have expressed my confidence that the relations between the two countries will develop comprehensively.”

—Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov, Asharq al-Awsat interview, December 26, 2018.

“The delegates of the Forum emphasized that they happened to visit a lot of places where Muslims live, but they have never seen such wonderful conditions for Koranic learning and for Muslims to live as here.”

—Mufti Sheikh Salah Mezhiev on the visit of the Muslim World League to Grozny, Republic of Chechnya 29 March-early April 2019.

When Muslim World League Secretary General Sheikh Dr. Muhammad bin Abdulkarim Al-Issa visited Grozny, the Republic of Chechnya, during the Russian “grand tour” of that delegation for “Islam: A Message of Mercy and Peace,” he arrived in a nation vibrant with growth, an increasing leadership role in the Islamic world, and newly strengthened ties with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The commitment to leadership by Chechnya was evident to the MWL from the outset: The entire conference was organized with the cooperation of the religious Administration of the Chechen Republic, helping to gather Grand Muftis, scholars, opinion leaders, intellectuals and politicians for the conference. This, in addition to religious leaders of several other faiths and Russian government representatives who enthusiastically confirmed that Islam is an integral part of Russian culture.

On March 29, Grozny hosted that international conference with the participation of delegates from forty-three countries and attended by 250 theologians, who discussed interrelations of Russia with the Islamic world and problems of Islamophobia the world over. During the conference, Ramzan Kadyrov was awarded the Order of the Star of Jerusalem by the decision of Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian President.

With outstanding generosity and hospitality, the Chechen president hosted the MWL delegation with an exhaustive agenda of engagement. This closeness highlights the strength of the bond between Chechnya and the MWL that preceded the visit of H.E. Sheikh Dr. Al-Issa and, with that, the depth of the impact of his keynote address on “Islam: A Message of Mercy and Peace.” Not only did Chechnya’s Grand Mufti meet representatives of MWL in Moscow, but the conference was held part of the time in



H.E. Sheikh Dr. Al-Issa receives token of appreciation for services to the North Caucasus region. Photo Credit: MWL



H.E. Sheikh Dr. Al-Issa signed a cooperation agreement with the State Fund for the Promotion of Islamic Culture, Science and Education of Russia.



“We don’t need just words. We need action. We don’t need just initiative. We need to initiate. Through our agreements signed in Russia, we have taken the important first step of turning our words into concrete action.”

— His Excellency Sheikh Dr. Al-Issa

Grozny itself, a move of exceptional symbolism that physically highlighted the meaning of Russia and Islam sharing an equal footing in the spiritual life of both nation and state. In addition, as reported on preceding pages, Dr. Al-Issa was invited to give a sermon during Friday prayers at the Great Mosque, an address of great conviction, honesty and clarity—qualities that could only be animated in an atmosphere of trust, warmth and intellectual and spiritual camaraderie.

Dr. Al-Issa was also invited to the popular talk show “Path,” shot in the main office of the Akhmat Kadyrov television and radio station in Grozny. The program and its round of participants focused on the MWL’s international Islamic conference and on memories of the late Chechen leader, “who sought to establish peace and order in Chechnya by following the Koran and Sunnah, the religion mercy and goodness.” The MWL also visited the grave of Akhmat Kadyrov. “The delegates of the Forum emphasized that they happened to visit a lot of places where Muslims live,” noted Grand Mufti Salah Mezhiev, “but they have never seen such wonderful conditions for Koranic learning and for Muslims to live as here.”



The Grand Mufti of Chechnya, President Kadyrov and representatives of the Russian Federation after the signing. The agreement promotes the concepts of moderation, tolerance and national integration. Photo Credit: MWL

“We are keen to strengthen our fraternal relations with Saudi Arabia. Therefore, discussions were held during these two days between the Saudi and Chechen sides over issues of cooperation in the implementation of investment projects in the fields of tourism, transport, agriculture, building materials, health care and others.”

– Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov, Asharq al-Awsat interview, December 26, 2018.

“He is perhaps the single most visible Russian official in the Middle East, having developed personal friendships with numerous Arab rulers.”

– The Jamestown Institute, November 2016, on President Kadyrov

“Saudi Arabia is the heart of the Islamic world.”

– Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov, November 2018, as quoted in The National (UAE)



H.E. Sheikh Dr. Al-Issa invited to deliver a Friday sermon at the “Heart of Chechnya” Great Mosque March 29, hosted by Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov. Photo Credit: MWL

CHECHNYA AND THE KINGDOM OF SAUDI ARABIA: THE NEW PATH FORWARD

But Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov has emerged with a much higher profile on the world stage than the major international conferences his country has hosted in recent years could grant him. In the words of The Jamestown Institute, a Washington-based think-tank specializing in Eurasian security, he has been “perhaps the single most visible Russian official in the Middle East, having developed personal friendships with numerous Arab rulers.” Among these have been closer relations with Syria in recent years, spearheading the repatriation of Russian-speaking Islamic State detainees, close relations with the United Arab Emirates and a significant role in Libya with his close relations to the new section of Russian interests in that country.

Yet the biggest development in Chechen foreign policy concerns that country’s relations with the

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. With an upswing of meetings and contacts since August and December of 2018 and into 2019, the two countries are seeing a new wave of cultural and economic relations. As reported in Asharq Al Awsat in December 2018, President Kadyrov underscored his keen interest to “forge a comprehensive strategic partnership with Saudi Arabia, noting that Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman was the ‘master of his word.’” Speaking to that London-based international Arab daily, President Kadyrov said that a Saudi delegation that visited Chechnya in December under the chairmanship of Prince Turki bin Mohammed, Advisor to the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, “was looking into means to implement bilateral agreements, especially infrastructure projects of the Chechen security unit.”

“We are keen to strengthen our fraternal relations with Saudi Arabia,” said President Kadyrov to international media last December. “During the visit of the Saudi delegation at that time, discussions were held between the Saudi and Chechen sides over issues of cooperation in the implementation of investment projects in the fields of tourism,



H.E. Sheikh Dr. Al-Issa dining with the President of Chechnya Razman Kadyrov. Photo Credit: MWL France

transport, agriculture, building materials, health care and others,” the Chechen president said, adding that talks also brought up the possibility to launch direct flights between Grozny and Jeddah. In addition, President Kadyrov, in November 2018, discussed with Saudi officials student exchanges and other forms of cultural cooperation. Kadyrov is also confident that relations between Russia and the Kingdom would develop comprehensively.

He emphasized that Saudi Arabia’s “well-being, development and security were very important for us and for all Muslims in the world.”

In the broader Gulf Region, President Kadyrov’s most frequent and public dealings have been with the Arab states of the Gulf Cooperation Council, where he has made frequent visits. In August 2018, he made the hajj pilgrimage to Mecca, stopping in Jeddah along the way, where he met and HRH King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud and HRH Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman bin Abdulaziz. A trip in November brought the Kingdom’s Crown Prince and the President together again in Abu Dhabi, and included a trip to Bahrain, where the Chechen leader met Prince Nasser bin Hamad Al Khalifa, commander of Bahrain’s Royal Guard, and visited a military base to observe training exercises. In December 2018, a Saudi delegation visited, headed up by Prince Turki Al Faisal bin Abdulaziz.

It is a remarkable development, given the fact that unintended diplomatic misunderstanding ensued when President Kadyrov hosted a gathering of thirty Islamic countries and approximately 200 Muslim leaders and scholars on August 25, 2016, dedicated to the 65th anniversary of the birth of Kadyrov’s father, Akhmad Kadyrov, the first President of Chechnya. However, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia did not attend. In clarifying the diplomatic problem caused by views that may have been misinterpreted, the Chechen leader urgently explained that he is against any “false” believers of the Islamic faith in the North Caucasus and throughout Russia who seek to do damage to the authentic nature of Saudi Arabia

and its teachings as the home of the Two Holy Mosques. Such false-believing individuals, noted President Kadyrov, seek to corrupt the faith and posed a terrorist threat.

Then, in a demonstration of the sincerity of his statements, the Chechen president, on November 27, 2016, using the extensive reach of social media, described his then-most recent visit to Saudi Arabia—one that was at the invitation of the Kingdom’s officials—emphasizing the focus on investment negotiation and boosting cultural and student relations and exchanges. “Saudi Arabia has pledged since its establishment to care about the pilgrims who flock to it from all corners of the globe. It provides all the facilities to them to perform their rituals conveniently and peacefully,” said President Kadyrov as quoted by the UAE state news agency Wam in November 2016, four months after the Islamic summit in Grozny. “[The Kingdom] is also unwavering in its commitment to implementing international resolutions issued by the UN Security Council pertaining to counter-terrorism.”

Since then, the relationship has grown steadily. In October 2017, the president “was welcomed like royalty” in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and authorities let him inside the Prophet Muhammad



Chechen girls in traditional dress. Photo Credit: Yelena Afonna/TASS



The famously majestic mountains of Chechnya. Photo Credit: Sputnik News (Russia)

(Peace Be Upon Him) room, which is closed to all but special guests.

In addition, Chechnya has gained prestigious diplomatic standing as a mediating force between Russia's policies in Syria and Saudi Arabia's interests in that war-torn country and Middle Eastern regional politics overall. Moscow itself has "high hopes for cooperation with the Saudis," reported The Jamestown Institute, therefore allowing more open relations for powerful actors in the North Caucasus, such as President Kadyrov and others, to intensify contacts with the Kingdom and the Middle East with a view towards successful, stable diplomatic and economic relationships all around. He has become a personal friend of many Arab leaders, including close American allies the Saudi Crown Prince and Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Zayed as well as with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, who, previously noted, awarded Ramzan Kadyrov the Star of Jerusalem medal on April 3.

Chechnya, Then and Now

Between 1999 and 2009, over the course of two wars, Chechnya endured a bloody struggle for its powerful autonomy within the Russian Federation. The conflict and the country were obscure to most. But Chechnya entered the world's conscience as a place of tragedy.

A union of spiritual forces both on the Russian and Islamic sides at last vanquished the violence, and Moscow has emphasized since then that Islam "is one of the traditional religions of Russia and will remain subsidized by the Russian government."

Today, the urban war-zone once seen in world media boasts beautiful boulevards, a thriving

commercial center, new architecture and refurbished historical buildings.

"[President Kadyrov] portrays Chechnya as essentially an independent Islamic state," states Neil Hauer, a political analyst on Syria, Russia and the Caucasus.

Guided by the peaceful stewardship of the president and the ideals of the MWL that emphasize the moderating force of Islam, relations between Russia and the Republic of Chechnya have since rebounded from a former low point into a new age of harmony and tolerance.

CHECHNYA'S REMARKABLE GROWTH

1. GROSS REGIONAL PRODUCT OF CHECHNYA

Average annual growth rate compared to other regions:

Chechen Republic – 15.7%

Republic of Tatarstan – 8.6%

North Caucasian Federal District (NCFD) – 14.2%

Stavropol Territory – 9.0%

Russian Federation – 10.9%

City of Moscow – 8.8%

2. GROSS REGIONAL PRODUCT (IN CURRENT PRICES), RUB (RUSSIAN ROUBLES) BILLION

Average annual growth rate compared to other regions:

Chechen Republic – 15.6%

Republic of Tatarstan – 8.1%

North Caucasian Federal District (NCFD) – 13.6%

Stavropol Territory – 10.8%

Russian Federation – 8.8%

City of Moscow – 7.1%

3. CHANGES IN POPULATION, GROWTH DYNAMICS

Chechen Republic – 1.8%

City of Moscow – 1.2%

North Caucasian Federal District (NCFD) – 0.6%

Republic of Tatarstan – 0.4%

Stavropol Territory – 0.6%

Russian Federation – 0.1%

Source: PWC, 2017



President of the Republic of Chechnya Ramzan Kadyrov, 2016.
Photo Credit: nbc.com

In the name of Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate

Feature Transcript of “Islam: A Message of Mercy and Peace”

RESOLUTION of ISLAM: A MESSAGE OF MERCY AND PEACE

International Religious Conference (Moscow – Grozny, Russia. 28-30 March 2019)

We, the participants of the “Islam, a Message of Peace and Mercy” International Religious Conference representing 41 countries worldwide, declare that Islam brings the ideas of humanism, mercy, fairness and moderation to the entire world. Prophet Mohammad (blessings and greetings of Allah Almighty be upon him) was sent by Allah as a “mercy for the worlds.” Today, Muslims strive for the unification of the ummah, its ulemas, preachers and thinkers all over the world by bringing the points of view closer, increasing the dispute culture and relying on the principles of middle way (wasatiyyah), moderation and Islam.

The Islamic unity is aimed at securing peace and conciliation worldwide, countering all forms of extremism and terrorism, as well as the openness to other cultures, dialogue between civilisations, and recognition of laws of the country of Muslims’ residence.

We state that for many peoples of the Russian Federation that have been living in this land since time immemorial, Islam is the traditional religion, a basis of their culture and worldview.

In Russia, primarily in the Caucasus, Islam was spread during the reign of the second caliph Umar ibn Al-Khattab (may Allah be pleased with him). Derbent is one of the places where 40 companions of the Prophet (may Allah bestow His mercy on them), who brought genuine faith to the Caucasus almost 1,500 years ago, came, lived and were buried.

In 922, in Volga Bulgaria Islam was recognised as the official religion, and in the Golden Horde and the Crimean Khanate, Islam became the official religion in the 14th century.

In the second half of the 18th century, Islam transformed into an established religion across the Russian Empire: On 4 December 1789, by Decree of Empress Catherine the Great, the Orenburg Spiritual Assembly of the Mohammedan Law (Shari’a) was created in Ufa, and in 1794, in the south of the Russian Empire, Simferopol, the Taurida Muslim Spiritual Board, was established.

The preamble of Federal Law 125, “On the Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations,” adopted in 1997, states that Islam, together with Christianity, Judaism and Buddhism, constitutes an

integral part of the historical heritage of the peoples of Russia. In the introduction to the Law, it is emphasized that the government “has respect for” Islam equally with other religions traditional for Russia.

The present-day laws of the Russian Federation are the most favourable for Muslims ever in the history of our country as they ensure freedom of faith and legal equality with the rest of citizens.

The government statutorily guarantees not only the freedom of individual and collective exercise of religion, but also the participation of representatives of Muslim communities in discussions of policy decisions affecting the interests of the faithful.

The government guarantees the freedom of religious activities, which include as follows:

- performance of collective religious rituals and ceremonies, holding festive events in the months sacred to Muslims;
- creation of religious communities, organisations and centres;
- ownership of religious facilities;
- free religious education for children and adults;
- establishment of scientific, educational, cultural and outreach institutions and centres;
- publication, export, import and distribution of religious literature, periodicals, video and audio products, devotional articles, preaching and awareness-raising efforts online;
- international contracts, free exit of the Russian faithful for religious education and hajj;
- engagement in charity activities;
- conditions for healthy leisure of Muslim families.

Discrimination of citizens on grounds of their religious beliefs, religious animosity, as well as violation of religious views and feelings of citizens are prohibited in Russia.

During the meeting with muftis of centralised Muslim religious organisations of Russia held in Kazan, the President of the Russian Federation stated that Islam is the most important component of the Russian cultural code, and the Muslim ummah is an integral part of the multi-ethnic population of the Russian Federation.



H.E. Sheikh Dr. Al-Issa delivers keynote at “Islam, a Message of Mercy and Peace” Conference in Moscow. Photo credit: MWL



H.E. Sheikh Dr. Al-Issa fellowships with group of students at the Great Mosque, stressing the importance of building a better future for the leaders of tomorrow. Photo credit: MWL

The participants in the “Islam, a Message of Peace and Mercy” International Religious Conference express their gratitude to President of Russia Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin and highly appreciate his interactions with Muslim organisations in the Russian Federation.

The Conference participants also express their gratitude to Head of the Chechen Republic Ramzan Akhmatovich Kadyrov for his assistance in the arrangement and holding of this representative forum.

The creative role of the Head of Chechen Republic lies in the fact that, over a short period, he caused the construction and restoration of more than one thousand mosques across Russia, as well as in Abu Ghosh near Jerusalem, recovery of the Khalid ibn al-Walid Mosque in Syrian Homs, and restoration work in the historic Umayyad Mosque of Aleppo (Syria). The mosque will be opened in the nearest future.

Large-scale activities in the field of revival of Islam and its culture are underway in the Chechen Republic, where six hafiz schools have been opened and currently operate, over one hundred and fifty medreses, as well as the Kunta-Haji Kishiev Russian Islamic University in Grozny and the Akhmat-Haji Kadyrov Islamic Institute in Kurchaloy have been constructed. “Put” (Path) TV and Radio Company.

The activities of Ramzan Kadyrov in the field of Islam revival in Russia are significant; his special role in ensuring effective dialogue between Russia and Muslim countries should also be noted.

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Starting from 2006, Fund for Support of Islamic Culture, Science and Education non-profit charitable organisation has been providing support to centralised Muslim organisations.

Russian Muslims actively engage in various socially significant events and programmes: volunteer movements; activities of scientific and education centres, youth discussion clubs; women’s clubs, work with military and convicts; and movements against drugs and alcoholism.

In recent years, the restoration of the Russian Islamic theological school has been taking place; it played an important role in global theology before the revolution: In the North Caucasus with its

centuries-old traditions, there are resources available for developing full-scale theological Shafi'i and Hanafi schools. In Bolgar, Republic of Tatarstan, supported by the President of the Russian Federation, the Bolgar Islamic Academy has been established. It is aimed at educating domestic Islamic scientists. The Kunta-Haji Kishiev Russian Islamic University successfully operates in Grozny. The matters of educational standards are regulated by the Council on Islamic Education that comprises presidents of most Islamic institutes of the country.

Today, Muslims of Russia have all opportunities for exercising their religion, engaging in religious activities and interacting with their co-religionists from around the world.

In their spiritual and practical activities, Russian Muslims stand up for the national interests and security of the country they live in and call for stabilisation of social relations. They strongly condemn extremism and terrorism in all their manifestations.

Islam does not accept extremism and terrorism; the said phenomena fundamentally contradict the tenets of Islam and other "heavenly religions" that consider peace and safety as the objective of public government and a great benefit for people.

Islam condemns extremism and terrorism. The Conference participants call on all Muslims to not only prevent those criminal phenomena, but also to explain their sins and depravity to others. Muslims must observe the traditional values of Islam and rely on the agreement of great scientists and centuries-old experience of the ummah, which must follow the straight way.

The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said: "My ummah will not agree to misguidance."

The Muslim World League expresses its negative attitude to the problem of extremism and terrorism, in particular, in its statement adopted at the conference in Mecca in December 2018.

Having praised Allah Almighty for His generous mercy and having blessed His noble Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him), and having heard and discussed the reports presented at the conference, the participants of the "Islam, a Message of Peace and Mercy" International Religious Conference arrive at the corresponding conclusions and adopt the following recommendations:

1. Understanding that the Creator has made us to be different, we call on Muslims of all countries to strengthen the highest values of Islam that is love, friendship, tolerance, peaceful co-existence, and preventing things that lead to conflicts, disagreements and intolerance.
2. Considering Islamic madh'habs variously from scientific and ideological points of view and being a manifestation of versatility of Islamic Shari'a and mercy of Allah to His slaves, we warn Muslims against affronts to followers of Islamic madh'habs.
3. Equate dissemination of discords and conflicts among representatives of different madh'habs to crimes and hold those guilty liable for that.
4. We call on Muslims to prevent dissemination of information inciting to hatred and contempt for each other and representatives of other religions through mass media.
5. We call on Muslims who live in non-Muslim countries to not only observe the laws of their countries, but also to respect the established traditions and culture of those countries.
6. We call on Muslims to abide by their identity in accordance with the laws of the country they live in; where such laws are not suitable for someone, that person must move to another country to avoid disturbing public order.

7. Islamic organisations in non-Muslim countries must preach among Muslim diasporas respect for local laws, traditions, and cultures, as well as implement positive civil integration based on the recognition of the national state concept.
8. Representatives of Muslim civic and governmental organisations must raise awareness of youth by explaining to young people the threat from extremist ideology.
9. Expose false, criminal messages of terrorists in their mass media and social media accounts, and combat their baneful influence on the youth.
10. The Conference participants confirm that terrorism and extremism have no place in Islamic madh'habs.
11. No religion being inherently extremist exists; however, in each religion there are certain persons who act for personal gain.
12. We call on Muslims to unite their efforts in fighting for the positive image of Islam, as it was granted through noble Prophet Mohammad (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him).
13. We recognise that the unity and solidarity of Muslims are not directed against other confessions or cultures; they are aimed at achieving fairness, mercy and conciliation, as well as meeting threats to the survival of mankind.
14. We call on secular and theological institutions to activate their education and awareness-raising efforts to strengthen the unity, solidarity, cooperation, love and conciliation among Muslims.
15. Strive for bans on false, extremist interpretations that seduce the faithful out of the straight way.
16. Prevent publication of fatwahas that blame somebody on the lack of faith, mischief, or falling into novelties; resolve disputable theological issues through a dialogue between authoritative ulemas and Islamic academies.
17. At their religious and scientific forums, Muslims must strive for unity, prevent stigmatization and manifestations of intolerance, and stand for the fundamentals of Islam adhering to the divine law of difference and diversity.
18. We call on Muslims to take practical measures more actively, demonstrate tolerance, and ensure cooperation between peoples and religions and their peaceful co-existence.
19. Orient the Islamic youth on acquiring knowledge, learning spiritual and cultural values, and condemning violence and evil.
20. Consider setting peace-making relations with representatives of other religions and cultures to be the most important task of Muslim organisations, while recognising universal human values.
21. Condemn the acts of terrorism that occurred on 15 March this year at two Muslim mosques in the New Zealand city of Christchurch, resulting from which 49 people were killed and 20 people were wounded.

Peace be with you!

29 March 2019 Grozny

“Our mosque is beautiful, but that it is beautiful on the outside is not enough. We should pray to Allah that all of us here will achieve beauty on the inside.”

— Ahkun Bayatizov, Imam of the Imperial Military of St. Petersburg, upon the inauguration of the Great Mosque of St. Petersburg in 1910



H.E. Sheikh Dr. Al-Issa with leadership touring St. Petersburg University. Photo credit: MWL

Dazzling Gems and Hidden Treasures

Two Great Mosques of Russia

“There is no panorama of the center of St. Petersburg that does not show two minarets. And this symbol is not only of St. Petersburg. This reflects the country itself, and the dramatic history of the mosque reflects the dramatic history of the country.”

—Dr. Efi Rezvan, former Deputy Director of the Kunstkamer, St. Petersburg, the city's oldest museum, as quoted in *Saudi Aramco World*.

“It combines global Muslim principles. The imam of the mosque says to visitors not from Tatarstan: ‘Here we have the names of all prophets: Isa (Jesus), Mussa (Moses), Ibrahim (Abraham) inscribed in the ornaments. They are your prophets too, and we all respect them. One God – different faiths.’ It was important to reflect in the design that Islam is a part of the global culture....They wanted to bring into the design all the best achievements and show the tolerant and open character of Islam.”

—The Kazan Planning Department upon the celebration of the restoration of the Kul Al-Sharif mosque in Kazan, Tatarstan, 2007.

KAZAN: THE KUL-SHARIF MOSQUE

It has been remarked often that nothing lives in the present more powerfully than the historical past. After the collapse of Soviet communism, public debate emerged around 1990 about how to revive the religious image of Kazan, an ancient capital about 700 km east of Moscow

whose Islamic character had been severely suppressed under the communist regime. At that time, a local planner in the city stated that one of the ways to initiate the process of renewing or creating a national image of Kazani architecture that reinvigorated the artistic and architectural heritage of the city could be a design contest for “perpetuating memories of the Muslim defenders of Kazan who fell in 1552.” Later, a local architecture historian added another idea: to resurrect the legendary, eight-minaret-strong Kul-Sharif Mosque that stood in the Kremlin

(a kind of complex of a city's most important buildings) of Kazan until it was demolished by the Russian Czar Ivan the Terrible in 1552 after that leader's conquest of the Kazan Khanate.



H.E. Sheikh Dr. Al-Issa speaking with Grand Mufti of Kazan. Photo credit: MWL

The idea gained momentum quickly, and a group of Tatar Muslim intellectuals and activists appealed to the president of the Republic of Tatarstan, Mintimer Shaimiev, reminding him “that the churches in the Kazan Kremlin had been built on the graves of Tatars and their mosques” and wished for a significant mosque “as a symbol of heroic resistance.” As President Shaimiev noted of the historic Muslim campaign:

“During the siege of Kazan, Seid Kul-Sharif was one of the defense leaders. Along with his pupils he showed persistent resistance and fell as a hero. So did all his pupils. The mosque was burnt and demolished; even the basement did not remain. Since then the legendary image of the mosque has lived in folk memories. Several centuries passed....In November 1995 the President of Tatarstan Republic signed a decree in which he announced the resurrection of Kul-Sharif Mosque....Before long the idea of the revival of Kul-Sharif mosque, the age-old hope, the dream of the whole Tatar nation began to make a reality....The resurrection of Kul-Sharif Mosque, by its significance and by the scale of what is being done, stands along with the adoption of the Declaration of State sovereignty of the Tatarstan Republic, enriching it and filling it with substance.”

The Muslim Russians persisted in their campaign for a more “national face” for Kazan by rebuilding the mosque inside the Kremlin and prevailed after the Republic of Tatarstan declared its sovereign status in 1990. With local funding as well as generous contributions from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, the restoration was completed in 2005. The mosque is considered one of the most beautiful structures in Russia and is on the UNESCO list of World Heritage Sites. It is an essential part of the new image of Kazan, today the official “Third City” of the Russian Federation.

The resurrection of the Kul-Al-Sharif Mosque in the Kazan Kremlin is particularly significant to the context of the political transformations of Russia

and the Republic of Tatarstan. Because of its ethnic, religious and historical background, Tatarstan struggled through a difficult battle to maintain dignity and stature in the Soviet Union. While union republics were the most privileged and had the highest degree of “sovereignty,” autonomous republics formed the second class.



Muslim leader defends his madrasa in “A Modern Depiction of the Siege of Kazan, 1552.”

During Soviet times Tatarstani national movement activists continued their attempts to “upgrade” Tatarstan’s status to that of a union republic, but attempts were effectively brought to an end by the Communist Party authorities and the KGB, “sometimes with dire consequences for the activists,” as one scholar notes. The spirit of the activists never waned, however, and the re-opening of the mosque highlights the moral power inherent not only in that republic but throughout the Muslim-dominated populations of the Russian Federation in the last two decades. As the official website for the Kazan Kremlin notes:

“It [the Kul Al-Sharif mosque] symbolizes the revival of statehood and commemorates defenders of the Muslim Fatherland. The central composition, formed by a dome flanked by four minarets, symbolically recreates the

al-Kabir Mosque in Boulgar [old capital of the Volga region Tatars], which was destroyed many centuries ago. It is used to symbolize Islam of the Volga region. It also reflects the legend of the eight-minaret Kul-Sharif Mosque. The decoration of the dome is associated with the image and details of the Cap of Kazan—the crown of the Kazani khans that was taken away to Moscow after Kazan had fallen. Another requirement... was to reflect in the design the 1,000-year tradition of Tatars' Islamic architecture... The old Boulgar symbol of flourishing and revival—a tulip—has been also organically incorporated into the form of the mosque."

For the Muslim World League, which visited the mosque in early April, the principles espoused by the organization are fulfilled in the vision of the Kul Al-Sharif's restoration: "The [Kul-Sharif] Mosque is a symbol of cultural identification in the globalizing world. It was designed in such a way as to reflect the global tendencies," stated the Kazan Planning Department in its literature on the restoration. "[It] combines international motives: Central Asian architecture, Tatar ornaments, Mauritanian elements.... The design is not specifically Tatar. It combines global Muslim principles... It was important to reflect in the design that Islam is a part of the global culture.... They wanted to bring into the design all the best achievements and show the tolerant and open character of Islam." This ideal of an internationally-minded, educated Islam is further propagated in the Museum of Islamic Culture on the ground floor of the mosque. It carries out scientific, research and educational activities, and selects museum exhibits and museum collections on Islamic history and culture and the Islamic civilization in the Middle Volga region.

Then, of course, there is the stunning beauty of the mosque, known to be as captivating by night with its dramatic, stark profile awash in light as it is a welcoming, flourishing center under the clean skies of the Volga basin by day. Construct-

ed with white Chelabyinsk marble, red oak, and Czech-crafted glass, the mosque opened in June 2005 to celebrate the 1,000-year anniversary of the city. It boasts four minarets that are fifty-eight meters high, with two additional, small minarets flanking the main portal—in all, including the museum of the entire complex, there are eight ascending crescent moons to be found, in honor of the number of minarets on the original 16th century building. An inner space, reaching fifty-five meters in height, consists of five floors designed for 1,500 people, with the square in front of the mosque able to accommodate another ten thousand. The total area is 19,000 square meters.

As highlighted in the official website of the Kazan Kremlin, the building plan of the mosque was meshed out by astronomers at Kazan State University to achieve "two squares intersected at an angle of 45 °," a measurement in the Muslim world that means "the blessing of Allah," and to precisely render the mosque's orientation towards Makkah. The walls are the eight overlapping lancet arches, carved with marble-framed verses from the Koran and ornamental braids. The high arched windows filled with stained glass are inscribed in the formed parts of the walls, and the dome windows are cut in the shape of tulips—the traditional Islamic design of the crowns of "caps" of the khans of Tatarstan.

"Kul-Sharif is not just a mosque," wrote one scholar in a noted Slavic journal in 2013. "It is a vector from the past that passes through today to tomorrow."

With the visit of H.E. Sheikh Dr. Al-Issa to the mosque, the struggle to bring the glory of that city's Islamic past into a reinvigorated and powerful future is the attainment of a dream: the international recognition that Kazan embodies the highest possible ideals espoused by Islam and honored by the MWL.

ST. PETERSBURG: THE GREAT MOSQUE

Writing in the November/December 2010 issue of *Saudi Aramco World* magazine, the award-winning screenwriter and journalist Mr. Sheldon Chad shared his experience with the Great Mosque of St. Petersburg, one of the most magnificent mosques in Europe:

"Step out of the Gorkovskaya metrostation [in St. Petersburg] at Friday prayer time and you feel as though you're in a crowd going to a sporting event, as hundreds and hundreds of people walk the couple of hundred meters to the mosque. Over the treetops, the sky-blue mosaic of the minarets and the turquoise cupola sparkle in the sun. As you enter the gates of the mosque, there are already Uzbek and Tajik women selling savory baked samsas and cigarettes. Behind you is St. Petersburg, but with the Central Asian-style mosque in front of you, its façades decorated in verses from the Qur'an in Arabic calligraphy, you can be forgiven for feeling far, far to the east..."

He continues:

"Another beauty that mesmerizes more than the building does: the faces. Twenty-three nationalities, from the length and breadth of Russia and abroad, who have all come to St. Petersburg... The spoken words are in Arabic, Russian and Tatar... The hats are traditional Tatar square-sided ones and the white kadis (skullcaps) worn by those who have been to Makkah on the Hajj. But again, my eyes return to the faces—Uzbek, Afghan, Ingushetian, Asian; from the Pacific, Europe, the Arctic, the Black Sea; Russian faces, African faces, Pakistani faces and even Arab faces. In those faces, more than anywhere else, it seems that [imam of the imperial military] AkhunBayazitov's prayer at the mosque's founding a century ago is being answered: 'Our mosque is...beautiful on the outside.... We should pray to Allah that all of us here will achieve beauty on the inside.'"

"Islam in St. Petersburg," writes the scholar of Russia and Islam Dr. Anas Khalidov, "strange though it may seem, reaches back to the very foundation of the city." It is indeed an unusual history, linked primarily with the local Muslim population and secondarily with the academic and political institutions of the city as the one-time capital of an imperial power. Muslims were among those who first arrived to build the city. In line with the declared will and the edicts of Peter I, manpower and resources from throughout the country were drawn in, "and Muslims living in Russia at that time were no exception."

At that time, the beginning of the eighteenth century, the Muslim population of the Russian Empire consisted of Tatars from Kazan and other cities in Volga basin. Their lands had been conquered and the area had ceased to be a separate state in the middle of the sixteenth century.

Czar Nicolas II's proclamation of religious freedom on April 17, 1905, gave the project for a mosque in St. Petersburg fresh life. Attempts to raise enough money proved futile, however, until a new man for the job was found—a newly chosen chairman of the project, Abd al-Aziz Davletshin, a Tatar nobleman and czarist general who had completed a hajj to Makkah.

There were ongoing delays regarding the exact location of the mosque in St. Petersburg, especially in obtaining enough land so that the mosque should be properly oriented toward Makkah. Davletshin demanded that the powerful Russian Premier Piotr Stolypin intercede, and Emir Abdul Ahat Khan of Bukhara dropped in for a personal visit to the czar. "It's time to start building the mosque, even next to the Peter and Paul Fortress, where the czars are buried," said the emir. "For Muslims to build in that place especially shows their respect for and pride in the royal family and their loyalty to the Russian Empire." The czar accepted. "At the turn of



Czar Nicholas II (1868-1918)

the century, after huge Muslim territories were added to the Russian Empire, the authorities decided that a great mosque should be here," the journalist Sheldon Chad cites a local scholar and museum scholar as saying. "St. Petersburg had the prime Orthodox Cathedral, then the Choral Synagogue was the synagogue for all Jews. The Buddhist datsan in St. Petersburg was the datsan for all Buddhists. The czar had to have in the imperial capital the main temples of all the communities. That's politics."

In 1906 a piece of land in St. Petersburg was bought by the Emir Bukhara from Czar Nicolas II to build what would then become the largest mosque in Europe of its time. On February 3, 1910, the Emir laid mosque's cornerstone. The first prayer was held on February 22, 1913, but the mosque was completed and opened on April 30, 1920, for regular prayers. During the communist regime the mosque, like the churches

around the city and throughout the country, was closed and used as a warehouse, only to reopen in the late 1950s at the urging of President Sukarno of Indonesia during a state visit.

Modeled on Gur-e-Amir, the tomb of Tamerlane in Samarkind, by the architect Nikolai Vasilev, a later émigré to the United States, now-famous images of the mosque's exterior speak to its stunning beauty. The mosque, which can accommodate seven thousand worshippers, is made of Finland-quarried stone and has a tiled azure dome and 49m-tall minarets that are decorated with azure blue mosaics, thereby giving the building the nickname of the "Blue Mosque." Being situated in downtown St. Petersburg, the jewel-toned dome is perfectly visible from the Trinity Bridge across the Neva. The interior of the mosque boasts magnificent green columns and decorative arches under the dome, consistent with the traditional architecture of central Asia.

As Mr. Chad, the journalist who wrote about the mosque for *Saudi Aramco World*, further described the interior: "The blue mosaic mihrab, or prayer niche, is bathed in blue light. Blue on blue, it is glorious. I see the lofty interior—the columns of green marble, the large dome, daylit now, filled with a chandelier inscribed with verses of the Qur'an."

While visiting St. Petersburg, MWL Secretary General H.E. Sheikh Dr. Al-Issa met with the Grand Mufti of the mosque, Dr. Ravil Pancheev, who presented a tour of the mosque and gave a brief history of the Muslims of the city. Mufti Pancheev, the Chairman of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of St. Petersburg and Russia's northwestern region, emphasized that special incentive was given to the development of bilateral ties in education and the development of spiritual relations between the two countries.

Clearly Mufti Pancheev, who has headed the mosque for thirty five years, was still expressing the persistent ideals of the Islamic faith when he told the Aramco reporter: “The official version [during the Soviet regime] was that religion

doesn't exist. Islam either... Today, life is in this building, with this building. And I say now it is a ship which will never sink. My main hope is that it will never be closed again.”

Principal Geographic Locations of the Muslim Population in the Russian Federation

NORTH CAUCASUS: Comprising the autonomous republics of Adygea, Karachay-Cherkessia, North Ossetia, Ingushetia, Chechnya, Kabardino- Balkaria and Dagestan. Of these, Chechnya is the most autonomous republic.

TATARSTAN: Tatarstan is located more southwest, situated in the heart of the Russian Federation in an area known as the Volga River Basin.

The capital, Kazan, sits at the confluence of two rivers – the famous Volga (north-south) and the Kama (east-west). Kazan is located near of such well- know cities as Nizhny Novgorod, Ulyanovsk, Kirov and near the Orenburg region, the site of the decree for the legalization of the Islamic faith by Catherine the Great in the 18th century.

BASHKOROSTAN: Located between the Volga River and the Ural mountains, the capital of this republic is Ufa. It is the most populous republic within the Russian Federation.

MOSCOW: An estimated 300,000 permanent Muslim residents and up to 1.5m including temporary (migrant) Muslim residents in a city of 11 million.

ST. PETERSBURG: An estimated 500,000 permanent Muslim residents and another 400,000 temporary or migrant residents in a city of 5 million.

MUSLIM POPULATION CONCENTRATIONS BY PERCENTAGE: Muslims are concentrated in five (of the 89 sub-regions in Russia) traditionally Muslim homelands: Dagestan (16.3% of all Muslims), Bashkortostan (14.6%), Tatarstan (13.5%), Chechnya (7.4%) and Kabardino-Balkaria (4.7%). Smaller numbers of Muslims lived in three other Muslim homelands: Ingushetia (3.0% of all Muslims), Karachaevo-Cherkessia (1.9%) and Adygea (0.8%). Altogether, about two-thirds of all Muslims in Russia (62.3%) resided in one of the traditionally Muslim homelands.—Source: Neven Vuckic, Catholic University of Louvain, “The Russian Orthodox Church and Interreligious Dialogue, 2017

Islam and Orthodoxy

Cooperation, Not Conflict

"We need to make a definitive choice in favor of Europe, but in that case a natural question arises: What can we bring to Europe? The only real contribution is Euroislam, i.e., a system of beliefs that bring together liberal ideas with Islamic values. This is an orientation of public thought which takes Tatars beyond national boundaries and at the same time builds bridges between the East and the West."

—Dr. Rafael Khakimov, former advisor to the President of Tatarstan

"Noteworthy...is the experience of co-existence between Christians and Islam in Russia. The traditional religions in our country have never come into conflict, while preserving their identity for a thousand years."

—The late Patriarch Alexy II of Moscow

The 16th-19th century Annunciation Cathedral of Kazan and the Kul-Sharif Mosque are located just a few steps from each other. When respective Christian and Islamic festivals fall on the same days, one might see a liturgy take place at the cathedral followed by a procession

from that church to the monastery of the Kazan icon. At the same time, believers will have gathered at the Kul-Sharif mosque for Eid Al-Fitr and Eid Al-Adha, while the Eid Al-Fitr sermons and prayers are broadcast live.



“It was Peter the Great who ‘set the stage for the systematic study of the Muslim East.’ Peter also personally ordered the first Russian version of the Koran; it was published in 1716 in St. Petersburg. Six years later, publication of The System Book or The State of the Muhammedan Religion required the development of an Arabic typesetting capability. Once that was available, Peter started issuing proclamations in Arabic.”

—Efim Revzan, former Deputy Director of the Kunstkamer, St. Petersburg, the city’s oldest museum, as quoted in Saudi Aramco World.

he concept of peaceful coexistence between traditional Islam and Orthodox Christianity has long been a subject of fascination for scholars and historians. When religion was “rehabilitated” in the former Soviet Union in the late 1980s, Islam had been pushed to the sidelines of public activities. It was seen by a few practicing people mostly as a means of ethnic identification and a ritual practice connecting a person to the world of his ancestors. The situation gradually changed during the 1990s for Islamic communities in Russia led by the Republic of Tatarstan when president of Tatarstan, Mintimer Shaimyev, opted for a symbolic gesture of rebuilding both the Kul-Sharif mosque and the Annunciation Cathedral. Here was a supreme example of the tolerant nature of Islam in its relationship with Russian Christian culture, as Tatarstan’s leadership revealed its strategy of revitalizing both “traditional” religions of the region.

The event was a world away from the religious oppression of the Soviet period. Muslims in Russia were persecuted much like worshippers of the Christian faith who were punished, either absurdly or severely, for the mere practice of their faith. The smallest transgressions were criminal: The former imam of the beautiful mosque of St. Petersburg, Musa Bigi, who first supported what he regarded as the ideals of the Bolshevik revolution, was inspired by the work of one of those leaders, *The ABC of Communism*. When Imam Bigi replied with his own book, *The ABC of Islam*, he was jailed. Only the intervention of Turkey’s



Peter I “the Great” (1672-1725). He personally ordered the first Russian translation of the Koran. Photo credit: Wikipedia

Mustafa Kemal Atatürk saved him, and he later escaped to exile. This kind of routine treatment of those who sought to practice their religious

Dr. Mikhail Piotrovsky, Director, the Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg

Housing one of the world's most important collections of Islamic art, the Hermitage played host to H.E. Sheikh Dr. Al-Issa in early April. For many years, the museum, led by its renowned director, who is himself a scholar of Islam, has taken pride in its status as a symbol of East-West magnificence, to which the quotes below attest:

"Russia is a Russian Orthodox country. It is an Islamic country, Islam is part of our history, and the Islamic population is part of our population."

"My profession is an Arabist," Piotrovsky says. "Being director of the Hermitage is a hobby." He

is being modest: He is a scholar with a reputation as one of the world's most efficient museum managers."

"Understanding itself as an empire, Russia had two very important things built in St. Petersburg in the beginning of the 20th century," Piotrovsky continues. "A Buddhist temple and the mosque. So it was, let us say, a historical presence and an imperial understanding of what the capital of an empire is."

From "Russia's Wider World," Sheldon Chad, *Saudi Aramco World*, November/December 2010.

beliefs in Soviet Russia was common, and united Muslims and Christians in a most unfortunate shared destiny.

As the scholar of Orthodox-Islamic relations Dmitiri Babich has written, since the collapse of the USSR, Muslim religious thinkers in Russia have identified the establishment of "a uniquely Russian approach" to Islamic doctrine, identity and practice as a key priority. In recent years, Muslim intellectuals based in Moscow as well as in various provincial capitals "have taken up this project with renewed intensity, offering a range of views about how the tradition relates to various ideologies of Russian nationhood." The region of Tatarstan has proven an outstanding litmus test of the re-assertion of this Islamic identity "à la Russe." The Volga Basin region (southwest Russia), with its Muslim population (Bashkortostan, Tatarstan, and some surrounding territories with sizable Muslim minorities) has always seemed like an "Islamic island" in the vast "Orthodox Christian sea," in the words of Robert Crews, a renowned expert on Russia

and Islam at Stanford University. He explains that a small, 18-kilometer wide "isthmus" located in the Oreburch Oblast separates the Muslim-dominated part of Russia from Central Asia. Demographic changes and the growth of Muslim migration in the Urals, the Volga Region, and Western Siberia now link the Russian "Islamic island" to the entire "Islamic continent." In this context, the Muslim population has felt increasingly connected to the wider Islamic world while remaining "at home" within Christian Russia.

The dynamic has long been a fascinating one. In recent times, however, Russia has sought to present the relationship between Orthodox Christianity and Islam as an example of a unique symbiosis that constitutes a basic foundation of Russian civilization. The Russian Orthodox Church, or the Russian Patriarchate, as it is otherwise called, is currently the largest (with respect to the number of faithful) autocephalous church within the Orthodox world. Because the Muslim population has increased steadily in recent years (estimated now to fall between 20

and 25 million faithful), that community forms a significant minority. Indeed, in certain regions the Muslim population has, in fact, become the demographic majority. As a result, notes the scholar Neven Vukic from the Catholic University of Louvain, “interreligious contact is a lived reality within the Russian context.” A law passed in Russia in 1997, while recognizing “the special contribution of Orthodoxy to the history of Russia” also named Islam, as well as Judaism and Buddhism, as “central to the establishment and development of Russia’s spirituality and culture.” In 1998, a year after the proclamation of the new law on religions, the Interreligious Council of Russia was established. This group is made up of representatives of the “traditional religions,” as recognized by the new law, such as the Council of Muftis of Russia.

On September 23, 2015, a new complex of the Moscow Cathedral Mosque was officially opened after a large-scale reconstruction, headlined by President Putin and attended by heads of state, spiritual leaders from around the world and ambassadors of European states. At that opening, President Putin excoriated the Islamic State (ISIS) for discrediting one of the world’s great religions. The message was one for the world at large: Russia and Islam co-exist in harmony. While the Russia-Islamic relationship has

been anything but free of conflict through the centuries, the Russian Church itself has been active in recent years in highlighting the general good will between the two civilizations. As the late Patriarch Alexy II stated in 2007:

“Noteworthy...is the experience of co-existence between Christians and Islam in Russia. The traditional religions in our country have never come into conflict while preserving their identity for a thousand years. Russia is one of those rare multi-religious and multinational states whose history has not known the religious wars that have plagued various regions of the world. . . . To this day, our compatriots have not come into any real conflict between them based on religious grounds.”

Such sentiment conforms to the stated principles of the Muslim World League. With a mission “to present the true Islam and its tolerant principles...extend bridges of dialogue and cooperation with all, engage in positive openness to all cultures and civilizations, follow the path of centrism and moderation.. and ward off movements calling for extremism, violence and exclusion,” it is possible that the future of the Christian and Islamic communities of Russia will be one that realizes the MWL goal “for a world full of peace, justice and coexistence.”

Catherine II of Russia and Imperial Tolerance for Islam

In 1773 the Holy Synod issued, in the name of Catherine, the “Toleration of All Faiths” edict. In the decree, the Synod indicated that the question of toleration arose specifically from Muslim reaction against the existing restrictions on mosque construction.

Although it states that “as God tolerates all faiths on earth, Her Imperial Majesty will also permit all faiths and desires only that Her subjects exist in harmony,” toleration of Islam is the decree’s main point.

All members of the Synod, all bishops and all priests were instructed to permit the construction of mosques and were “not to interfere in Muslim questions or in the

building of their houses of worship.” This edict signaled the beginning of a new period in state- Muslim relations, one in which Islam was tolerated and there was a form of coexistence between Islam and the Russian government.

It was in 1788 and 1789 that [Empress Catherine] made her greatest contribution to Russia’s administration of its Muslims with the establishment of the Muslim Spiritual Assembly.”

—Dr. Alan D. Fischer, *Enlightened Despotism and Islam*, 1968.

Russia's Muslim Spiritual Boards

Patience, Persistence and Peace

"Deep understanding and interpenetration of cultures and greatly respectful dialogue of representatives of the traditional religions have shaped our spiritual unity, based on general moral values such as justice, truth, hard work, respect for relatives, patriotism and love for the common fatherland, which is one for everyone."

—Russian President Vladimir Putin at the ceremonial meeting of the 225th anniversary of the Central Muslim Spiritual Board of Russia, October 2013.

"Noteworthy...is the experience of co-existence between Christians and Islam in Russia. The traditional religions in our country have never come into conflict while preserving their identity for a thousand years."

—The late Patriarch Alexy II of Moscow



The Grand Mufti of Moscow, Ravil Gaynedtin

Photo credit: RadioFreeEurope

The most highly regarded governing spiritual bodies of the Islamic faith in Russia are:

- The Central Spiritual Board of Muslims in Russia
- The Council of Muftis of Russia
- The Spiritual Board of Muslims of the Asian Part of Russia
- The Coordination Center for Muslims in the Northern Caucasus of The Muslim Spiritual Board of the Republic of Tatarstan

A little-known and fascinating power institution within Russia's cultural-political makeup is the Muslim Spiritual Board (Dukhovnoe upravlenie musul'man), a centralized ecclesiastical institution established by Empress Catherine II ("the Great") in the late eighteenth century by way of a world-changing Imperial Edict at Ufa, Ohrenburg, near the modern day Republic of Tatarstan, on September 22, 1788. The edict was the first major step in Imperial Russia to giving Muslim communities full rights of worship, among other civil liberties, a move that represented enlight-

ened progression past the dark days of Czar Ivan the Terrible and forcible conversions.

In one celebratory move, the akhun, or chief, of the Orenburg Seitov Settlement, Muhammad Djan-Hussein, was given the office of Mufti and became the spiritual leader of all the Muslims living within the Russian Empire, with the exception of the Crimea, which would have its own Mufti.

This decree legally secured for Muslims the status of full citizens of the Russian empire and

gave them recognition of their historical role in development of Russia as a state and civilization.

As the scholar Mr. Matthew Derrick has explained, the edict incorporated the Muslims of Russia into the confessional structure of the state “while also shaping and reinforcing an Islam that was considered fundamentally loyal to the Czarist Empire.”

Less than two centuries later, the dark days returned when the Bolsheviks, against the background of intense institutional atheism, suppressed Islam once more and often tortured and detained imams, while shutting down Islamic centers of learning. The state retained the Muslim Spiritual Board (MSB) as a way to control Soviet Muslims and control Islam in a way that its adherents would be faithful to the Soviet state.

The institution did not disappear alongside the USSR; rather, dozens were created in regions throughout the Russian Federation as well as other Muslim regions of the former Soviet Union.

Beginning in the early 1990s, the political leadership in Muslim-majority regions such as Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, and other principal nations in Russia’s internal “parade of sovereignties” regarded the institution as, in the words of Mr. Derrick, “an important attribute of independent statehood and, correspondingly, a means of redeveloping Islamic traditions vital to ethno-national culture.” The organization was renamed the Central Muslim Spiritual Board or CMSB of Russia.

In the year 2000, the Grand Mufti Sheikh-ul-Islam Talgat Tadhuddin Safa, a prominent Muslim leader since 1980 with high standing in the worldwide Islamic Ummah, led the CMSB of Russia to become one of the spearheads of the spiritual and moral revival of Russian Islamic society in general and against the penetration of extremism in Muslim environment, in particular. As the Grand Mufti of Moscow commanding attention from pulpits of mosques and broadcasts on the central and federal republican TV channels, Mufti Safa was known for a profound

knowledge of Islam and a high sense of patriotism. When he came on the scene in 1980, the then-iteration of the CMSB in Russia commanded only 94 local communities, following the thirty-year period of Soviet persecution during which more than 14,500 mosques or Islamic centers of learning were shut down. Currently CMSB Russia unites more than 1,500 communities. Under the leadership of CMSB, Russia has built over a thousand mosques since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The Mufti Spiritual Boards are powerful and influential institutions and are known for their individualism in determining Russia’s Muslim future, from Kaliningrad to Khabonvosk. In the words of President Vladimir Putin, who addressed the 225th anniversary of the Ohrenburg Decree that established the Spiritual Boards in 2013: “The activity of Muslim communities, the work of Muslim religious leaders have great importance. Our task is to educate youth in the spirit of mutual respect, which is based on the feelings of co-citizenship, patriotism and national identity.” He further stated:

“It is our common history which we should keep as a relic. We must preserve the memory of our fathers and grandfathers, who were together on the battlefields and at peaceful creative labour, and they never divided their comrades, neither by nationality nor by faith. They appreciated mutual respect and supported each other in trouble and in joy and left us an example of the great, conquering friendship, and we will not allow anyone to destroy and tarnish it.”

Russian-Muslim Entrepreneurial Success

From Local Start-Ups to International Oligarchs

“The quality of startups represented has gone up.”

—Marvin Liao, a partner at 500 Star-Ups, a seed venture capital financier and startup accelerator based in Silicon Valley, commenting on Kazan’s “Venture Fair,” one of Russia’s prominent startup industry events.



Emblem of Tatarstan Image Credit: Republic of Tatarstan, public domain

Many an unsung success story permeates the world of Russian-Muslim entrepreneurs, but that busy segment may not have the time to notice as much. In recent years, the number of start-up conferences, tech fairs, venture capital fairs, etc., based mainly in the thriving capital city of Kazan, in the Republic of Tatarstan, have taken root, and the bloom has been an abundant one. Kazan, one of the highlights of the recent trip by Secretary General H.E. Sheikh Dr. Mohammad bin Abdulkarim Al-Issa, is proud of its active role as a center for Muslim-focused entrepreneurship. “Today, Kazan is quickly becoming one of Russia’s strongest tech hubs, with many universities and science

parks,” boasts a local business website. A brief overview of this activity includes:

In late April 2019, the 11th annual “Russia - Islamic World: KazanSummit” was held, one of the leading international economic events of the Russian Federation and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). Organized by the President of the Republic of Tatarstan, Rustam Minnikhanov, the summit, founded in 2009, is substantially supported by the Russian Federal Assembly and the Government of the Republic of Tatarstan. As stated on its website, the conference is a “top international investment conference [and] remains the main and unique platform for cooperation between the Russian Federation and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) member states.”

In 2018, the city hosted the 4th annual OIC Youth Forum, an event aimed at young entrepreneurs from member states of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (of which Russia is an observer state). Its stated goal was to “identify and support the best projects, [and] develop new contacts between Russia and the international business community in order to increase the investment attractiveness of the Republic of Tatarstan.”

The 11th “Kazan Venture Fair,” one of Russia’s major startup-industry events, was held in the

Republic of Tatarstan in April 2016. With the goal to bring together 700 to 1000 delegates annually, the fair that year featured 55 startups selected from 378 companies. The ten best startups at the event received around \$77,000 each, as well as an opportunity to pitch to investors in Silicon Valley. "There's no market in Russia for some technologies, but they are in demand abroad, and it was a right decision to create this platform here," said Rustam Minnikhanov, Tatarstan's president, at the event. Marvin Liao, a partner at 500 Star-Ups, a seed venture-capital firm and startup accelerator based in Silicon Valley, said at the conference that Tatarstan has established a fine foundation for tech startups.

"The quality of startups represented at the fair has gone up in comparison to last year," he said, noting that agricultural start-ups and IT were the region's particular forte.

In this atmosphere of tolerance and freedom of economic opportunity, the MWL can only encourage such Russian Muslims to pursue their dreams with energy and ambition.

Meanwhile, one must ask: What is the status of the bigger entrepreneurial picture for Muslims? One does not hear often of "oligarchs" in Russia who happen to be Muslim. Yet as it turns out, the Russian Federation is indeed home to a significant number of Russian-Muslim entrepreneurs, many of whom are prominent billionaires. With data sourced from Wikipedia and Forbes magazine, we highlight four of these extraordinary individuals not only for their material achievement, but for the spiritual discipline involved in rising from circumstances that were across the board not only impoverished, but characterized by the experience at one time of state-sanctioned or social prejudice for their Islamic faith.



Alisher Burkhanovich Usmanov, born 1953 in Soviet Uzbekistan, as reported by Forbes magazine in 2017, commands an estimated net worth of \$15.1 billion, though the December 2013

"Bloomberg Billionaires Index" reported an estimated net worth of \$19.6 billion, making him approximately the 37th wealthiest individual in the world. In May 2014, *The Sunday Times* (UK) listed him as the second-richest person in the UK, with an estimated fortune of £10.65bn. Whatever the exact amount, Mr. Usmanov built an impressive metal and mining operation from scratch while becoming the majority shareholder of Metalloinvest, a Russian industrial conglomerate. He also owns the powerful Kommersant publishing house. Additionally, he is a co-owner of Russia's second-largest mobile telephone operator, MegaFon and is co-owner of Mail.Ru, the largest internet company in the Russian-speaking world. *Photo Credit: Wikipedia*



Suleiman Kerimov. Born in Dagestan 1966, he is an unusual and discreet character on the international scene, now best known as a prominent politician in Russia with a seat in Parliament with the

Liberal Democratic Party, while possessing an estimated worth is \$7.1 billion. Has been described by Forbes as one of the most private Russian billionaires, most likely due to the fact that he "hasn't granted a single interview in the twenty years of his entrepreneurial career," Specializing in capitalizing on troubled companies, Mr. Kerimov began his career as an

economist in an electrical plant and, foreseeing the collapse of the Soviet Union, began to invest in industrial companies. He later acquired banks and investment in mining. As markets around the world began to contract in 2007, Mr. Kerimov and his associates expected that Russia would suffer more than the West from the oncoming crisis. He sold stakes in such Russian blue chips as Gazprom, built ties with Western banks, and approached Wall Street proposing to invest the most of his fortune to defend the institutions from short-sellers. In return, it was expected that he would receive favorable lending terms for future loans. In 2007, Mr. Kerimov invested billions in Morgan Stanley, Goldman Sachs, Deutsche Bank, Credit Suisse and other institutions. As Wikipedia reports, “though neither Kerimov nor the Western banks have disclosed the exact size of his investment, it was sizeable enough for him to receive a call from the U.S. Treasury during the darkest days of the economic crisis imploring the oligarch not to sell his stakes.” On March 10, 2016, Kerimov was recognized with an award for outstanding social contribution to the Republic of Dagestan by the president of the Republic, Ramazan Abdulatipov. On March 20, 2017, Suleiman Kerimov was awarded the Order for Merit to the Fatherland of II degree by President Vladimir Putin for his outstanding contribution to the development of parliamentarianism and legislation. *Photo Credit: Wikipedia*



Ziyavudin Magomedov. Born in 1950 to a poor family in the rich oil fields of Baku, Azerbaijan, a former Soviet republic in the Caucasus, Mr. Alekperov was made deputy minister of the oil and gas industry of the Soviet Union in 1990 and

thereafter became the youngest deputy energy minister in Soviet history. At that time,

he promoted the establishment of so-called vertically integrated state-owned energy companies, bringing together a wide range of organizations in the energy sector that were otherwise inefficiently reporting to myriad different Soviet bureaucratic institutions. One of these included the formation of the first such vertically integrated company, Langepas-Uray-Kogalymneft in 1991. Two years later, this concern became the famous LUKoil Oil Company, with Mr. Alekperov as its president. He has remained president of LUKoil since that time. As stated by Wikipedia, the company employs more than 100,000 people and commands reserves second only to ExxonMobil. Forbes has estimated his net worth at \$17.2 billion. *Photo Credit: Wikipedia. Photo Credit: Wikipedia*

Ziyavudin Magomedov, born in Dagestan, is a 50-year-old energy and shipping tycoon and the 58th-wealthiest person in Russia, with an estimated net worth of \$3.5 billion. In an unusual twist, this particular billionaire, through his foundation, has financed various Christian and Muslim heritage projects and will now finance the conservation of Jewish relics. He was arrested and charged with “racketeering and embezzlement of state funds” in March 2018.

Russia's Silicon Valley and Islamic Investment

"Eurasia is destined to become one of the meaningful centers of Islamic economy."

—President of the Skolkovo Moscow School of Management, Andrei Sharonov

The Russian Silicon Valley, as it likes to style itself, is a region called "Skolkovo," and its program consists of a highly ambitious goal of gaining a place at the table and on the world stage as a technology incubator of the first order. A good part of this entrepreneurial aggressiveness is focused on the Islamic Eurasian market—as recently revealed in a report put out by the Skolkovo Institute for Emerging Market Studies (IEMS), entitled "The Islamic Economy—the Fastest Growing Large Economy." This Eurasian-focused report is a studied observation about this dynamic regional phenomenon.

Russia is a leader in the Eurasian Islamic economy both in terms of export volume to the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and raising awareness of halal fashion through mass media and events. In the Islamic finance sector, Kazakhstan has the most Islamic financial assets, with 69 percent of the total among the nine Eurasian countries reviewed in the report.

As quoted in The Asia Times, the President of the Skolkovo Moscow School of Management, Andrei Sharonov, said, "Eurasia is destined to become one of the meaningful centers of Islamic economy" with a diverse ethnical, linguistic, religious and cultural composition. "The economies in Eurasia are more Islamic than we think," The Times went on to comment, noting that those economies "already have functioning partnership banks or "Islamic windows" that provide Shari'a-compliant loans, deposits and investment opportunities." The region boasts "record

success stories of Muslim tech start-ups." The global Islamic economy is worth more than \$2.2 trillion with a projected growth rate of more than seven percent annually until 2022.

According to the report, more than one-third of the Eurasian population is Muslim. They are customers for halal goods and services and entrepreneurs who have the potential to enter that market. "Therefore, the Islamic economy has established itself in Eurasia. Azerbaijan leads the Eurasian region in terms of the level of Islamic economic development and possesses the highest overall Global Islamic Economy Indicator score in the halal food, travel and pharmaceuticals and cosmetics segments," the paper states. In addition, the opportunities are considered quite substantial for Islamic economy inroads within China's Belt and Road Initiative, since the majority of the infrastructure projects that are to be developed will be in outright Muslim countries or countries with predominantly Muslim populations.

"The main objective of the report is to tell more about the development of the Islamic economy phenomenon in the world and Eurasia, its dimensions and its drivers," added Mr. Sharonov. "The Islamic economy astonished us with its size and its pace of growth. At the same time, so little information is available on Islamic economic development in our region. We could not stay apart from informing local stakeholders on great opportunities and prospects that we believe are inherent to Islamic economy," she said.

The First Muslim Woman Judge

The Triumph and Tragedy of Mukhilisa Bubi of Kazan

“Observe your duty to Allah in respect to the women, and treat them well.”

—The Last Sermon of the Prophet Muhammad, Peace Be Upon Him

“The believers, men and women, are helpers, supporters, friends and protectors of one another, they enjoy all that is good, and forbid all that is evil, they offer their prayers perfectly, and give Zakah (obligatory charity) and obey Allah and His Messenger. Allah will bestow Mercy on them. Surely Allah is All-Mighty, All-Wise.”

—The Koran, Chapter 9: 71, from the website “Voice of Salaam”



Mukhilisa Bubi, Tatar Intellectual and First Female Muslim Judge. Image Credit: realnoyvre.me

On 11 May 1917, following the abdication of Czar Nikolai II, the participants of the All-Russia Muslim Congress elected a woman as a qāi (a Muslim judge) to the Central Spiritual Administration of Russia, Mukhilisa Bubi (1867-1937). As the scholar Rozilya Garipova has written, “This was a unique event not only in the history of Russia’s Muslims but also in the whole modern Muslim world.” Close to nine hundred Muslim delegates from different regions of the Russian Empire participated in the Congress

of 1-12 May 1917, all representing all social, intellectual, and political trends, with “Muslim modernists” constituting the majority of the delegates. For the first time, over one hundred Muslim women also participated in a political congress as delegates.

The main concern of the congress was, however, not the question of the status of women; rather, the central issue was whether Muslims should strive for cultural or territorial autonomy in the future political structure of Russia. All delegates agreed that shari’a and Muslim identity, which differentiated Muslim populations from the Christian population of Russia, must constitute the foundation of any kind of autonomy. The congress decided to transform the famous Orenburg Muslim Spiritual Assembly of Catherine II the Great, the main institution that had represented Muslims in the Russian Empire, into a modern Central Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Inner Russia (and also of Siberia). The decision was made to have the position of Mufti subject to elections instead of direct appointment by the czar. Also elected, for the first time, were six qadis [judges]. In the Administration, Mufti and qadis represented a collegiate body. For one of these qadi positions the assembly elected Mukhlisa Bubi.

Hailing from Tatarstan, she came of age in a region that had provided an exceptional atmosphere for Muslim women to exercise a voice and involve themselves in intellectual activities, a movement that gained momentum in that corner of imperial Russia in the 19th century. A full-fledged literary movement took root, created by these women. In newspapers and magazines there were special women's pages—largely unheard of at the time for any group of women—and often edited by women.

By May 1917, Mukhlisa was already a well-known and respected woman of religious authority. In 1897 she and her brothers had set up the first girls' madrasa, in a village in present-day Tatarstan. This school provided education to girls and trained female teachers. After her election to the office of qadi in May 1917, Mukhlisa Bubi directed the newly established Family Department within the Central Spiritual Administration, which dealt with issues of

divorce, dower, marital consent, inheritance, and other legal issues of interest to women.

At subsequent All-Russian Muslim congresses in 1923 and 1926, she was reelected to this position. In the meantime, she continued to write in *Islam Majallase*, the Administration's Tatar-language journal, on issues concerning Muslim women. But beginning in the late 1920s, the Bolsheviks started their full-blown repression of Islam in the USSR, and closed almost all mosques and Muslim schools. Like so many other Tatar Muslim activists, intellectuals, and religious scholars, Mukhlisa was accused of being a member of an anti-Soviet bourgeois-nationalist organization, and was executed in 1937. Around that time the Central Spiritual Administration for the Muslims of Russia had been forced into silence and submission. The spirit of Mukhlisa Bubi and her message of strength and faith, however, was never forgotten.

The Death of Ivan Ilyich (1886), by Leo Tolstoy.

From the back-cover of the Arabic translation

Image Credit: amazon.com



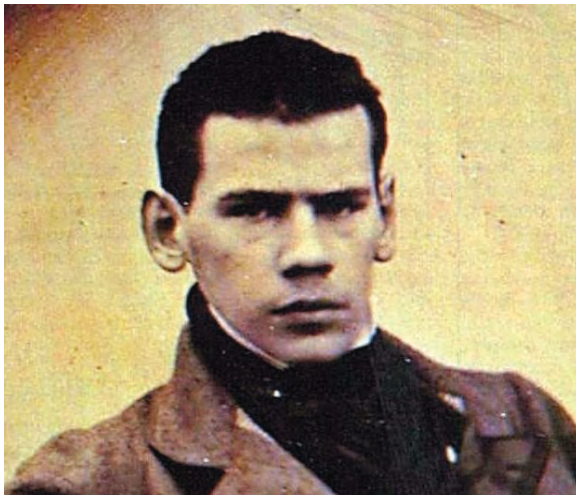
Count Leo Tolstoy and Islam

“After I read the Koran, I realized that all what humanity needs is this heavenly law.”

—Russian aristocrat and one of the greatest authors in history

“The legislation of Koran will spread all over the world, because it agrees with the mind, logic and wisdom.”

—Count Leo Tolstoy



Count Leo Tolstoy during his student year at Kazan University, in the mid-1840s. The Islamic atmosphere influenced him profoundly. Image Credit: Wikipedia

Count Leo Tolstoy is universally known as one of the greatest writers in history, most famous as the author of *War and Peace*, *Anna Karenina*, and *Resurrection*. Yet there was another side to this complex aristocrat and humanist far less known even to his literary fans—that of his deep fascination for and appreciation of the Islamic religion.

As described by the scholar Dr. Piotr Stawinski of the University of Krakow, Tolstoy acquainted himself with Arabic culture and language in the years 1844-1845, when he was studying Oriental History at the Faculty of Arabic and Turkish at the University of Kazan, founded by Czar Alexander I in 1805. In spite of the periods of intense “Russification” over the centuries, the town didn’t lose its Tatar ambiance and spirit, to which Catherine II contributed, restoring the right to build mosques. In Tolstoy’s youth, the level of education there was high (said to be second in rank after the St. Petersburg Center for Oriental studies) and the town itself, because of its location, was to some extent a link between East and West culture. It was portrayed by the scholar Edward Tracy Turnelli, who lived in Kazan in the mid-nineteenth century, thus:

“The University of Kazan may, in many respects, competes with the most celebrated Universities of Europe; I will even add here, that in one point it surpasses every other that exist: I allude to the study of the oriental languages. As regards this branch of education, there is really no establishment in the world which offers the student such great advantages as does the University of this town. Independent of the lessons of numerous professors many of whom (for instance Mirza Kazembeck) have acquired,

by their writings, a European reputation, and under whose guidance the student becomes theoretically acquainted with the oriental languages, there exists moreover what is greatly wanting in other European Universities – extraordinary and unexampled opportunities for the practical study of these tongues and dialects. The town of Kazan, alone in the world, possesses a University attached to which are to be found Persians, Turks, Mongols, Tartars, Armenians, etc.”

Tolstoy had many opportunities to meet Muslims during his stay in the Caucasus, first accompanying his brother and then joining the army as a cadet or later involving himself in the Crimean War and dealing with the allied forces as an artillery officer defending Sebastopol. That population represented a multimillion-person strong part of the Russian Empire, living mainly in Kazakhstan, Tatarstan and Bashkortostan. It inspired his novel *Hadji Murad*, 1912, about Muslim warriors in the Caucasus.

At the beginning of 1901, Tolstoy was excluded from the Orthodox Church for the “harmfulness” of many of his political views. However, he found himself the recipient of expressions of solidarity from more unusual circles of society—including Kazan Tartars—and this set off an exchange of letters and views on religious subjects with Muslim scholars. “Your unanimity in the main elements of my faith, expressed in response to the Synod’s ruling, made me very happy,” he replied to them. “I greatly appreciate spiritual relations with Muslims.”

He began to study Islam, came to know the Koran at a respectable level of depth and wrote a plan to circulate the teachings of Muhammad along with European and Hellenic philosophy. Tolstoy’s attitudes toward Islam deepened considerably when he decided to print a small collection of the thoughts of the Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him) based on a

selection of Hadiths sent to him by a prominent Indian Muslim publisher. “In Tolstoy’s opinion,” write Dr. Stawinski, “all of [these Hadiths] were interesting and profound, and the whole book deserved to be published. They allowed him to overcome his prejudice towards the Prophet and the Qur’an, which he previously harbored and led him to more profound studies of Islam.”

We know that he read a book by Vladimir Solovyov, *Muhammad, His Life and Teachings*, published in St. Petersburg in 1902. His own writings on that theme appeared a year later. He wrote: “The essence of this faith came down to the fact that there is no deity worthy of worship except the One True Almighty God, that He is merciful and just, and will judge each person individually, according to his or her faith and the balance of his or her good and bad actions which means peace for the righteous, and damnation for evildoers... He wants people to love Him as well as each other. The love for God is expressed in a prayer, compassion for others, assistance and forgiveness.”

These writings demonstrated compassion for the persecutions that Muhammad and his followers suffered, and noted the positive distinguishing features of the new Muslim community, as Dr. Stawinski points out. Though not without criticism of the religion as expressed in the very active correspondence he held with Muslim scholars, his awe for the religion remained immense for the rest of his life. In 1909, shortly before his death, Tolstoy is said to have “always referred to Islam with the great respect” and believed that the religion “compared favorably with the Orthodox [Christian] teachings.”

The attitude of the legendary Count Leo Tolstoy toward Islam deserves an extensive analysis. A great number of Islamic teachings were close to his heart, and this, as he explained, was the consequence of Islam’s more recent

appearance, which enabled it to avoid certain misapprehensions of Christianity. What is more, Islam “did not require a dramatic change in the life of the individual.” The interest in that faith was for Tolstoy an ultimate expression of his own concern about his fate and the fate of other individuals and societies. A man of both East

and West in character, spirit and education, the author of *Resurrection* believed that the wisdom of Christianity and Islam contained the same religious basis, ever searching for the community bonds of moral strength and spiritual unity.

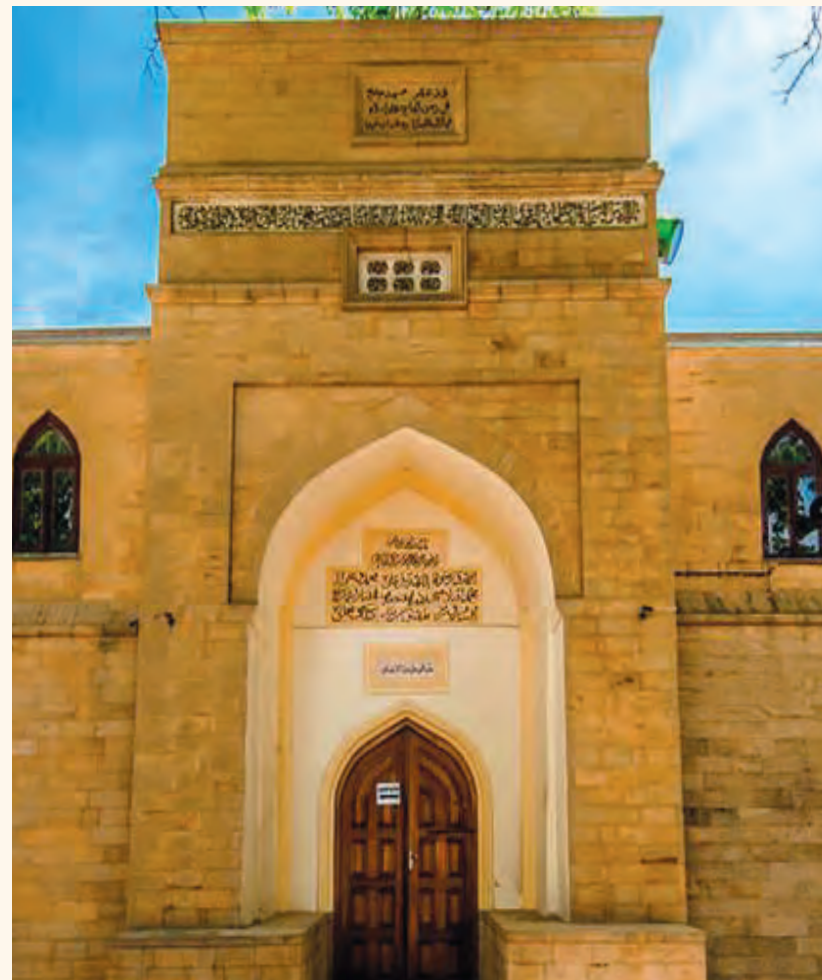


“As I tell my American friends in and out of government when they ask about the integration of Muslims, the majority in any country has vital obligations. For one, they must create a framework of identity independent of religious or ethnic affiliation. The binding element should be love of country. The universal ambition should be to enable meaningful contributions to society.

“I have dwelled upon this matter deeply in the weeks since a crazed extremist gunned down 50 Muslims in their houses of worship and injured 50 others in New Zealand....[T]he question goes to the heart of how we construe successful integration. My answer remains the same.

“In fact, I believe the message is even more poignant today. To build tolerance and promote full national integration, majority and minority bear a responsibility that is, at its core, similar. It starts with embracing diversity and putting the interests of the entire nation first.”

— H.E. Sheikh Dr. Al-Hssa, *Fox News* (op-ed), April 10, 2019



Russia's oldest mosque, at Derbent, on the coast of the Caspian Sea, dating from the 8th century.



THE
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