

Russia's 'Other Ummah'

From 'Ethnic Shi'ism' to Ideological Movement?

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Since the beginning of the Syrian War, ties between Russia and the Shia sphere are primarily examined in terms of geopolitics, while little attention is being paid to the indigenous as well as immigrant Shia populations in Russia itself. Since the incorporation, either by annexation or initial protectorate settlements, of the khanate of Astrakhan in 1556 as well as of the southern Caspian-Caucasian khanates, the emirate of Bukhara and the highlands of eastern Bukhara in the tsarist empire between 1806 and 1896, the Russian space has, nonetheless, included a Shia Muslim population. Later absorbed into the USSR, where the population of Shia origin and culture reportedly counted up to 2.7 million around 1970 (Bennigsen and Lemerrier-Quelquejey 1979: 149, 157), parts came to reside in Russia either when it obtained its present contours in late 1991 or during different migration movements that took place since.

Who Is Russia's Shia Population?

Nonofficial estimates of the number of Shia currently living in Russia go up to over 2 million. Ja'fari, or Twelver Shi'ism, which is globally the largest and mainstream branch of Shi'ism, the majority creed in Iran, Iraq, Bahrain and Azerbaijan and also the state ideology in Iran, is primarily present among the ethnic-Azerbaijani population in Russia. Officially counting some 630,000 people according to the federal census of 2010 (with some 57,000 living in Moscow and over 130,000 in Dagestan), they are partly indigenous communities who lived in Dagestan, Moscow and other parts before 1991, or they are permanent residents who acquired Russian citizenship since. The size of this population may have increased by some 10 per cent since then. Additionally, there are the labour migrants and other 'temporary residents' from Azerbaijan, which reportedly amounted to more than 536,000 in mid-2017, with a large presence in the Moscow area as well as in Yekaterinburg.



So, all together, the Azerbaijani portion of Russian society amounts to some 1.16 million. Some two-thirds are believed to adhere to Ja'fari Shi'ism by culture and tradition. Hence, Azerbaijani form the largest ethno-demographic base of Shi'ism in Russia and the entire former USSR. Another traditionally Ja'fari Shia group are the so-called Middle Asian Iranians from the Samarkand area. Forming a compact Shi'ite minority since the late eighteenth century, they are now considered an Uzbek subethnic group (Pétric 2007). It is difficult to pin their numbers because no sectarian or subethnic breakdown exist for the reportedly 1.9 million labour migrants and temporary residents from Uzbekistan. On the base of extrapolations, the size of this population group could range from 3,000 to 7,000, making it potentially the second-largest group of the Ja'fari Shia tradition in Russia.

In Dagestan, apart from the Shia Azerbaijani in and around Derbent, some 3,000 Aghul people in the region's southeast follow Ja'fari Shi'ism as well (Topchiev 2014: 5). Remnants of a historically much larger historical Shia population, their existence briefly attracted attention after murky acts of vandalism on a Shia shrine near Derbent. Furthermore, over the last ten years or so, a certain number of native Russian citizens from Slavic, Turkic and Caucasian origin as well as Tajik labour migrants converted to Ja'fari Shi'ism from Sunnism, Christianity or agnosticism or atheism under the influence of transnational Ja'fari Shia networks or that of Iranian confessional diplomacy. Finally, temporary residents, diplomatic personnel, business and education expatriates, and refugees of Shia background or persuasion from Iran, the Arab sphere and Pakistan also add to Russia's Shia population.

The following of Ismaili Shi'ism, which is the second-largest Shia denomination in Russia and in the former USSR in general, consists mainly of labour migrants from Tajikistan's Gorno-Badakhshan region. The size of this population could be 21,000 to 23,000 (Kalandarov 2005: 10). Radically different from Ja'fari Shi'ism in terms of doctrine, institutions and practice, Ismailism and its adherent base remains characterised by the absence of a country where they form a majority or deliver the state doctrine. It is characterised by a strong identification with the micro-regional languages and genealogies of the western Pamir and the upper Panj Valley as well with the Western Europe-based, hereditary Ismaili leadership and its international philanthropic network. As such, it is developing along very different lines from Ja'fari Shi'ism.

Ideological Reinvigoration

Regardless of actual practice and active sectarian consciousness, Russia's roughly 780,000 Ja'fari Shia form four percent of its indigenous and temporary immigrant Muslim population of some 20 million. Shia concentrations can be found in Moscow, Saint-Petersburg, Yekaterinburg and Derbent. As things stand now, a certain degree of sectarian polarisation in the wake of the Syrian War as well as targeted attacks against Shia people and Shia infrastructure by North Caucasian IS affiliates remain always possible. But scenarios of an imminent explosion of communal violence between the Sunni and Shia populations in Dagestan and between Sunni and Shia migrants in the large Russian cities are probably alarmism and threat inflation that is typical for certain international and domestic opinion makers, security analysts and region watchers. Instead, a number of other developments will prove crucial in shaping the nature and direction of Shi'ism in Russia.

To start with, the Shia Azerbaijani in Russia and certainly the temporary migrants and the communities in Dagestan who continue to interact directly with Azerbaijan and its society through various channels will, to different degrees, be influenced by the dynamics of Shi'ism and of religiosity in general in that country (see Balçi 2007 and Wiktor-Mach 2017). Not in the least this comprises the growth of an actively religious population segment for which Shi'ism goes beyond the ethnic and that represents a substantial share of 17 to 20 per cent of the population. Partly, the social teachings of Shi'ism thereby inform a reaction to the impact of globalisation and modernisation and against the injustices committed by oligarchies and state bureaucracies. There is also the move, both by state-affiliated and nonstate religious actors, to establish a specific Azerbaijani Shia-ness as a component of national identity, although interpretation and practices often radically differ between the protagonists involved.

Finally, Salafi and Hanafi Sunni proselytism among 'ethnically Shia' Azerbaijani populations will likely enhance a counter-reaction in the form of a stronger Shia consciousness. Another crucial development is related to the sources of authority among Russia's Ja'fari Shia. It is too easy to reduce Shia mobilisation and the reinvigorating of Shia consciousness in the former USSR to something merely related to Iranian backing. Iran is indeed the 'beacon state' and houses several

intellectual centres of the Shia realm, has a political system anchored in Shia political theology and internationally champions Shia causes, including in Russia, through the Ahl'i Beyt movement and a number of Hosseiniyya congregations (Lisnyansky 2009).

A Russian Shia Muftiate?

Direct Iranian influence is indeed palpable among Shia migrants from southern Azerbaijan. But there are other transnational channels at work as well, not in the least the movements of the *marāji*. These are clerics and religious guides, often with the rank of grand ayatollah, who have acquired a level of religious knowledge and credibility in the Ja'fari Shia intellectual elite that allows them to be a source of imitation for the individual believer. Prominent *marāji* like Javad Tabrizi, Fasil Lenkorani (and those continuing their work after they passed away in 2006 and 2007 respectively), Ali al-Sistani and Nasr Makarem Shirazi have been acquiring a following among Shia in the former USSR since the 1990s. Often based in Iran and Iraq, they have their own campuses, resources, congregations, information channels and representation offices. These institutions treat individual religious, ethical and life questions; issue statements on political and governance that are not necessarily the official line of the Iranian state government; conduct charity work; distribute printed, audio-visual and digital literature; issue stipends for religious seminarians; send preachers and facilitate the Hajj and pilgrimages to Shia sites (see Arminjon 2012 and Filin 2013).

The different autonomous and semi-autonomous *marāji* movements were and remain instrumental in reinvigorating Shia ideology in the vacuum left after the demise of the USSR. Pretty much like with Salafism, audio-visual information carriers, the internet and social media became important channels for the spread of Ja'fari Shi'ism, societal views informed by it and news and views from the wider Shia world. In terms of official Shia institutions, the only organ supervising Ja'fari Shia in the former USSR remains the 1944-founded, Baku-based Spiritual Board for the Muslims of the Trans-Caucasus. Since it has been situated in a foreign country since 1991, the question is whether an official spiritual directorate and a muftiate for the Shia in Russia will be created, what ideological direction and autonomy it will have if it materialises and whether it can have the same intellectual authority as the Iranian and Iraqi *marāji*.

Shifting beyond Ethnicity?

This question is all the more relevant, as Shi'ism, with its heterodox and mystic nature, is at times suggested to be an inalienable component of a Eurasian subsphere in the Islamic world, an objective ally in the traditionalist resistance against liberal globalism and an antidote against puritanical Sunni persuasions like Salafism and Takfirism (for more on this idea, see De Cordier 2008). Contrary to historically strong Sufism, which made it out of the USSR experience fragmented and often inordinately co-opted by power structures, Ja'fari Shi'ism has a political theology that is well developed and autonomously informed. It may be exactly this that explains the reluctance to establish a Russian Shia muftiate. For some time to come, the further development and direction of Ja'fari Shi'ism in the country will remain closely intertwined with that among the Azerbaijani population in the country as well as in Azerbaijan itself.

Simultaneously, it can move beyond that when some groups adopt Ja'fari Shi'ism out of dissatisfaction with the official or state-affiliated Sunni authorities or with the growing influence from the Persian-Arab Gulf on Sunnism, as reportedly happens among some Tajik immigrants. The issue of conversions to Shi'ism among Tajik labour migrants in Russia was first reported to me by different interlocutors in the Vakhsh region in southern Tajikistan seven years ago. Despite the occasional hyperbolic statements about 'massive numbers' up to 'one-third' popping up during informal conversations and on Sunni web portals, it seems to be rather a niche movement involving a few thousand, be it one well present on the mental map in society.

Another factor that may make Shi'ism attractive is its sacred principle to exalt the downtrodden as well as its capacity to serve as a cultural affirmation for ethnic groups, like some small ethnicities in Dagestan, who face ethno-linguistic assimilation in larger Sunni groups. Depending on the motives and circumstances that brought and bring various individuals and groups to more actively professed Ja'fari Shi'ism, these can become the most active champions of its cause or of social movements inspired by this persuasion. As such, the Shia element in Russia might become more relevant and present than its low-profile minority state suggests.

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