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The right to believe, to worship and witness
The right to change one's belief or religion
The right to join together and express one's belief

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RUSSIA: Detained and tortured for faith, Tatar Muslims claim

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18 (https://www.forum18.org)

Dina Amirova, on trial in Tatarstan's capital Kazan, insists that she and her husband have been targeted as devout Muslims trying to find out more about their faith, after leaflets of the banned Hizb ut-Tahrir political movement were found among a wide range of Islamic-related literature at her home. She told Forum 18 News Service she and her husband have never had personal contact with any of the group's members. Her husband Renat Amirov told Forum 18 he was arrested, beaten and tortured to try to force him to testify against 12 local Muslims on trial for alleged Hizb ut-Tahrir membership. From the town of Elabuga, Taliya Gabdulkhakova insists charges including murder and religious extremism against her son and three other relatives have been fabricated. "My son obeyed Russian laws and paid taxes – he just stood out because he never missed a prayer time, wore a beard and wasn't dressed like everybody else," she told Forum 18. Her son has alleged "medieval torture" against the four while in detention, including heavy beatings, threatened rape and execution. Irek Arslanov, who is responsible for relations with religious organisations at Kazan City Government, dismissed suggestions to Forum 18 that torture and intimidation are practised.

Intimidation and torture are used to try to secure "religious extremism" convictions in Tatarstan, young Muslims have maintained to Forum 18 News Service in the republic's capital, Kazan. Local state representatives categorically deny the allegations.

Dina Amirova is currently on trial at Kazan's Moscow District Court for alleged participation in the banned organisation Hizb ut-Tahrir. While a 2006 police search of her student room uncovered Hizb ut-Tahrir literature, Amirova has never been in contact with anyone from the organisation, she insisted to Forum 18 at Kazan's Al-Ikhlas mosque on 22 June. Rather, as Hizb ut-Tahrir was much discussed in Kazan in 2004-6, she downloaded some of its brochures from the internet and took others left in mosques. "As people who had recently come to Islam we found it interesting," she remarked. "But we never thought we'd be accused of extremism or overthrowing the government for reading literature." The seized brochures had no special significance in her personal library, Amirova added, being taken from among books ranging from Salafi to Sufi Islamic thought.

Hizb ut-Tahrir is an international political movement vowing to re-establish a single Islamic state, or caliphate, and claiming to be entirely peaceful. However, Forum 18 notes Hizb-ut-Tahir's denial of key human rights, including freedom of religion and belief, and that Hizb ut-Tahir has called for Jews to be murdered. Hizb ut-Tahrir's Draft Constitution prescribes execution for Muslims who change their faith, along with serious restrictions on other human rights (see F18News 29 October 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=170).

While members have been prosecuted in Western Europe for a vehemently antisemitic 2002 statement, this text is little known in Russia. The Supreme Court here chose to outlaw the group as terrorist in a closed, 14 February 2003 session simply because its adherents aim to re-establish a caliphate and are "working to create a schism in society". Dozens of Hizb ut-Tahrir pamphlets are now on the Federal List of Extremist Materials, as is a statement by Sheikh Nafigulla Ashirov, head of the Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of Asiatic Russia, questioning the soundness of the Supreme Court ban (see F18News 10 April 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=756).

Russian human rights defenders have similarly criticised the apparently flimsy evidence – particularly "expert" interpretations of the group's literature - in mass trials of alleged Hizb ut-Tahrir members (see F18News 20 April 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=765). Many of those charged claim they are being persecuted as devout Muslims (see F18News 18 April 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=761).

Police raids, surveillance, interrogations and beatings

Shortly after Amirova's criminal case was opened on 29 April 2008, police again raided her home, a flat in Kazan shared with her husband, Renat. During subsequent interrogation, officers threatened to charge her with terrorism and violent overthrow of the government if she did not denounce other Muslims, Amirova told Forum 18. Harsher treatment was reserved for her husband.

Renat Amirov was detained separately after the 16 May 2008 early morning raid, he told Forum 18. Ramil Ismagilov of the Organised Crime Police first warned him that he would be imprisoned for decades for terrorism and organised crime if he did not sign a statement denouncing 12 local Muslims as terrorists, he said. The 12 are currently on trial in Tatarstan's Supreme Court for

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alleged Hizb ut-Tahrir membership. On refusing, Amirov was then beaten about the legs and body by Renat Safin of the FSB security service and two other officers, he told Forum 18. Light beatings and questioning – including on why and how he became a Muslim – continued for approximately eight hours, he said.

After an 8pm hospital visit certified no injury, Amirov was subjected to three further forms of physical brutality in repeated succession, he recalled. First, a gasmask was placed over his head and the air supply cut off at intervals with the instruction that he should raise his leg if prepared to co-operate; when this did not work, one interrogator exhaled cigarette smoke along the air supply tube. Amirov then demonstrated to Forum 18 the "swallow" ("lastochka") – a position in which his hands were handcuffed behind his back and he was suspended by them – and how he was also made to stand with legs splayed as far as possible and then beaten about the thighs. This continued for approximately nine hours, he told Forum 18, but he still refused to sign the statement. After a short break and six hours' verbal interrogation, Amirov was finally released at approximately 4pm on 17 May, he said.

Initially intimidated, Amirov lodged a complaint with the Investigatory Committee of Tatarstan Public Prosecutor's Office on 9 July 2008, but it was dismissed two days later for lack of evidence.

On 10 December 2008, Amirov was escorted from his workplace by two FSB officers who tried to induce him to collaborate by making offers of money and threats against his wife - including of televising a film of her naked made with a secret surveillance camera in their flat, he told Forum 18. "After I was shown that film I refused to talk to them," Amirov said. No further action has been taken against him.

Acting imam at Al-Ikhlas mosque, Rustam Safin also declared publicly that he would not denounce the 12 Muslims currently on trial for alleged Hizb ut-Tahrir membership, he told Forum 18 at the mosque on 22 June. "As I said, it is not 12 Muslims being judged, but the whole ummah [Muslim community]," he explained. "We can't divide the ummah into separate groups – if someone is in error, then other Muslims should correct him." By saying this, he believes, "I supposedly created the conditions for this party [Hizb ut-Tahrir] to operate."

According to Russian media, Safin "created conditions for the development" of Hizb ut-Tahrir in Kazan from 2006-8, including arranging "a secret meeting where he tried to persuade those present of the exclusive role" played by the movement, thus leading them "astray". A search of the imam's flat found publications setting out Hizb ut-Tahrir's "extremist ideology, contradicting traditional trends in Islam". On 12 May 2009 Kazan's Soviet District Court handed Safin a two-year suspended sentence for organising the activity of a banned extremist organisation (Article 282.2, Part 1 of the Criminal Code). He was consequently ousted from his long-standing teaching post at a local madrassah [Muslim college] and formally dismissed as imam by the Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of Tatarstan.

Safin denies links with Hizb ut-Tahrir and stresses that he calls for tolerance and understanding in his sermons. "Christians and Muslims live peacefully in Tatarstan," he remarked to Forum 18. "There can be no talk of revolution." Safin believes that an acquaintance among the 12 on trial who admitted Hizb ut-Tahrir membership probably confessed under duress while in detention.

Official denial of torture

Irek Arslanov, who is responsible for relations with religious organisations at Kazan City Government, dismissed suggestions that torture and intimidation are practised by religious extremism investigators in Tatarstan. "Of course we don't have any such instances - violations by the courts, pressure on witnesses or anyone else," he told Forum 18 in Kazan on 24 June. "Everything is sufficiently civilised and reasonable – the investigative organs respond well and sort things out."

Renat Valiullin, head of Tatarstan's Council for Religious Affairs, was also confident in the fairness of the local criminal justice system. Rustam Safin was sentenced due to literary evidence and "using the idea of building a caliphate in his sermons," he pointed out to Forum 18 in Kazan on 22 June. Asked whether the method used to achieve a caliphate might in that case be crucial, Valiullin replied that, "it's not important whether by military or peaceful means. The main thing is that they don't recognise the existing authorities and speak out against them. That in itself is evidence that the institution of a constitutionally based state is being violated."

Imam Ildus Faizov, who heads the Propaganda Department of the Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of Tatarstan, agrees. Asked at his Bulgar Mosque in Kazan on 23 June what danger the alleged Hizb ut-Tahrir members posed, he maintained that, "People not learned in the foundations of religion began to say we need to rebuild the state and bring Muslims to power." While they might claim to use peaceful methods, he continued, "this is what all extremists say - only once you're inside and have passed a number of stages do you understand you have to fight. And when they start overt and persistent protest, the next step is obvious."

At first maintaining that Rustam Safin "turned out to be one of them" but later expressing doubt, Faizov also berated some of the 12 alleged Hizb ut-Tahrir members as former drug addicts and criminals. "How can they build a caliphate?"

Devout Muslims targeted?

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From the Tatar city of Elabuga, Taliya Gabdulkhakova believes a wide-ranging set of charges - including religious extremism, terrorism and murder – against her son, daughter-in-law, nephew and his wife were "fabricated from beginning to end", she told Forum 18 in Kazan on 21 June. Currently on trial at the Supreme Court of neighbouring Bashkortostan, the four have been detained since autumn 2007. They were targeted as particularly devout Muslims, Gabdulkhakova maintains. "My son obeyed Russian laws and paid taxes – he just stood out because he never missed a prayer time, wore a beard and wasn't dressed like everybody else." Danil Gabdulkhakov was also under police surveillance from 1998, she added, when, aged 16, he took up an offer to study Islam in Chechnya, returning several months later in poor health.

A recent statement by Danil Gabdulkhakov viewed by Forum 18 maintains that the four have been subject to "physical and psychological pressure and medieval torture" while in detention, including heavy beatings, physical exposure, threatened rape and execution. As a result, he writes, "my will was broken and, as dictated by the investigator, I wrote everything they wanted to hear from me, signed all the papers." These establish that the detainees were involved in a religious organisation called "Islamic Jamaat", he writes - many of whose members were arrested on the eve of celebrations to mark the 450th anniversary of Bashkortostan's incorporation into Russia - as well as the murders of three policemen.

A 25 June 2008 response to Taliya Gabdulkhakova from the Volga Federal District Office of the General Public Prosecutor, viewed by Forum 18, states that the four detainees have not been subject to unlawful treatment.

Previously, claims of detention and torture due to Muslim beliefs have centred on the North Caucasus (see F18News 18 August 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1171).

Latterly, ordinary Muslim prisoners outside the North Caucasus have also complained of maltreatment due to their faith. In one prison in Sverdlovsk Region, they are not permitted to observe prayer times and beaten by prison staff for trying to do so, according to Islam.ru Russian Islamic affairs website. In Tambov region, Tajik, Uzbek and Kyrgyz prisoners have complained that a mosque they were permitted to build was closed in April, when prison guards also demonstratively destroyed a copy of the Koran. (END)

For a personal commentary by Irina Budkina, editor of the http://www.samstar.ru Old Believer website, about continuing denial of equality to Russia's religious minorities, see F18News 26 May 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=570.

For more background, see Forum 18's Russia religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1196.

Analysis of the background to Russian policy on "religious extremism&quot is available in two articles: 'How the battle with "religious extremism" began' (F18News 27 April 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1287) and 'The battle with "religious extremism" - a return to past methods?' (F18News 28 April 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1288).

Reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Russia can be found at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=10.

A compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be found at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351.

A printer-friendly map of Russia is available at http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=russi.

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