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RUSSIA: What's wrong with "extremist" Koran translation?

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

While many Muslims in Russia are outraged by a 17 September Novorossiisk court ruling banning as "extremist" a widely-used Russian translation of the Koran by Azerbaijani scholar Elmir Kuliyeu, some Muslim organisations have welcomed the ruling. Their objections to Kuliyeu's text – equally applicable to another translation they accept – suggest to Forum 18 News Service that long-standing rivalries between Russian Muslim organisations may lie beneath state moves against Kuliyeu's work. Critics of the translation highlight his rendering of several ayats (Koranic verses), but Forum 18 notes that his rendering of them differs little from those of other widely-available Russian translations. Ravil Tugushev - a Muslim lawyer who has lodged an appeal against the Novorossiisk ruling - told Forum 18 he also compared Kuliyeu's text with four other translations and found "no special differences between them".

The translation of the Koran ruled "extremist" by a low-level Russian court on 17 September is essentially no different from other widely accepted translations into Russian, Forum 18 News Service has found. A specialist on Islam at the Centre for Ethnopolitical Studies within the Russian Academy of Sciences, Akhmet Yarlykapov, is personally acquainted with the text's translator, Elmir Kuliyeu. "He doesn't give the impression of an extremist-minded person," Yarlykapov commented to Forum 18 on 29 September, "and there's nothing extremist in his works or translation, either."

Also ordering the work's destruction, the ruling against Kuliyeu's translation of the Koran was issued by October District Court in the Black Sea port of Novorossiisk. Russian Muslims are rushing to file appeals in the one month available (F18News 27 September 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1879).

Some Muslims and at least one non-Muslim scholar of Islam in Russia have welcomed the "extremism" ruling. Yet their objections to Kuliyeu's text – equally applicable to another translation they accept – suggest to Forum 18 that long-standing rivalries between Russian Muslim organisations may lie beneath state moves against Kuliyeu's work (see below).

According to the ruling – seen by Forum 18 – Kuliyeu's translation contains "statements about the superiority of Muslims over non-Muslims on the basis of attitude towards religion"; "negative evaluation of persons who have nothing to do with the Muslim religion"; "positive evaluation of hostile actions by Muslims against non-Muslims", and statements inciting Muslims to commit hostile and violent acts against non-Muslims. The ruling gives no concrete examples from the text, however.

Initially promising to put Forum 18 through to Judge Gennady Chanov – responsible for the October District Court ruling – on 26 September, his secretary later insisted that the judge "does not give comments".

"Crude violation"

The Council of Muftis - one of Russia's main Muslim organisations - is spearheading opposition to Chanov's ruling. "In banning the principal written source for the second largest number of religious followers in Russia, the District Court firstly crudely violates the Constitution of the Russian Federation and international norms on freedom of conscience," the Council argued in a 20 September public statement. "Secondly, it undermines Muslims' faith in Russian law, the Russian legal system and ultimately the fairness of the Russian authorities."

The same day, a representative of the All-Russian Muftiate – a rival to the Council of Muftis - defended the ruling against Kuliyeu's translation of the Koran to Interfax news agency. From a theological point of view, Farid Salman maintained, Kuliyeu's works "correspond with the views of the 'Salafi' school, not with Islam that is traditional for Muslims of Russia." The term "Salafi" here refers to Islamic purists, more commonly known in Russia as "Wahhabis".

Roman Silantiev, a specialist on Islam in Russia and vice-chair of the Justice Ministry's Expert Council for Conducting State Religious-Studies Expert Analysis, echoed that Kuliyeu's translation of the Koran was "pro-Wahhabi". "Nobody is banning the Koran itself, and this is not an attack on Islam at all," he insisted to Rossiiskaya Gazeta newspaper on 21 September. "Rather, it is the latest blow to the Council of Muftis (...) Other Muslim organisations - the All-Russian Muftiate, for instance - have many questions about translator Kuliyeu."

Long-standing rivalry

Silantsev further noted that the Russian translation of the Koran by Valeriya Porokhova has become widely accepted in Russia. Salman of the All-Russian Muftiate and Mufti Talgat Tadzhuddin of the Central Muslim Spiritual Board – another of Russia's main Muslim organisations - wrote to the Interior Ministry's Counter-"extremism" Department in May 2013 suggesting that some Islamic literature - including Porokhova's translation of the Koran - be protected from "extremism" rulings, Interfax reported. Silantsev also signed their proposal.

While long-standing rivals, Tadzhuddin – a top Soviet-era Muslim leader - and Mufti Ravil Gainutdin – Council of Muftis chair - still represent "establishment" Islam in Russia, Forum 18 notes. At a February 2012 round table in the run-up to Vladimir Putin's return to the presidency, Tadzhuddin told Putin the country had been preserved thanks to the Almighty and "with your direct involvement". Gainutdin followed by assuring presidential candidate Putin that "Muslims trust you and wish you success".

The All-Russian Muftiate is a newcomer to competition between Russian Muslim organisations, although Farid Salman previously had a long career with Tadzhuddin's Central Muslim Spiritual Board. Soon after the Muftiate's foundation in late 2010, it called for the Council of Muftis' activity to be stopped for causing "considerable damage to the security interests of the country" and seeking "incitement of interethnic and inter-confessional discord and war", Interfax reported.

False claims?

In his 21 September 2013 Rossiiskaya Gazeta comments, Silantsev directed readers to the website Antiwahhabizm.ru where "you can find a whole lecture asserting that Kuliyeu's translation is pro-Wahhabi." Viewed by Forum 18, the anonymous "Rebuttal of Elmira Kuliyeu" lecture on the website accuses Kuliyeu of "monstrous heresy", such as by maintaining that Allah sits on a throne and has a face, whereas "all Muslims know that Allah lies beyond space".

In support of this, the speaker cites numerous points in Kuliyeu's translation of the Koran, such as ayat [Koranic verse] 20.5: "Milostiviyi vozneshia na Tron (ili utverdilsia na Trone)" - literally, "The Gracious One has ascended to the Throne (or is established on the Throne)". Another contested translation is of ayat 28.88: "Net bozhestva, krome Nego! Vsiakaia veshch pogibnet, krome Ego Lika" - literally, "There is no god but He! Everything will perish except His Face."

Here, Forum 18 found Kuliyeu's translation to be close to English translations of the Koran, such as the widely accepted 1930s text by Indian Islamic scholar Abdullah Yusuf Ali: "(God) Most Gracious is firmly established on the throne"; "There is no god but He. Everything (that exists) will perish except His own Face." On making three further, similar comparisons, Forum 18 found that Ali's translation also uses terms recalling physical attributes, claimed by Kuliyeu's opponents to be "Salafi/Wahhabi" (although Islamic purists would be expected to do the opposite).

Forum 18 also found Porokhova's Russian translation of the Koran – defended by Kuliyeu's critics - to use the same or similar terms. The ayats above, for example, are translated as: "The Gracious One is He Who is established on the throne" ["(Sozdatel) Miloserdnyi – Tot, Kto utverdilsia na prestole"] and "Apart from Him there is no other god; everything will perish except His face" ["Krome Nego – inogo boga net; Vse gibnet, krome Ego lika"].

In all cases, the Antiwahhabizm.ru lecture's objections to Kuliyeu's translation centred upon the use of descriptive language. It did not suggest – as in most other cases familiar to Forum 18 – that criticism of other religions or non-Muslims equals "extremism".

Ravil Tugushev - a Muslim lawyer based in the town of Marx (Saratov Region) who has lodged an appeal against the Novorossiisk ruling - told Forum 18 that he has also compared Kuliyeu's text with Porokhova's and three other popular Russian translations by Gordi Sablukov, Magomed-Nuri Osmanov and Ignaty Krachkovsky. Tugushev found "no special differences between them," he remarked to Forum 18 on 25 September.

Out of context

Tugushev also told Forum 18 that the Novorossiisk ruling might centre on ayats taken out of context that are typically cited in criticism of the Koran: "But of course I can't say exactly until I am acquainted with the case material." Presuming his appeal is accepted, he reckoned that this would not be heard until after 17 October.

Russia's counter-"extremism" policy has already banned religious texts regarded as classics, but which contain ideas many modern readers would not share. Ruled "extremist" by two low-level courts in 2012, for instance, an-Nawawi's 13th-century collection of 40 hadiths [sayings attributed to the Islamic Prophet Mohammed] defends the idea that a person should be killed "who forsakes his religion and separates from the community". Such sentiments are clearly incompatible with freedom of religion or belief, but Forum 18 notes that they may be found in various historical texts written from many religious and non-religious standpoints (see F18News 15 July 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1858).

Whatever way Kuliyeve's translation of the Koran is interpreted, Forum 18 has found its potentially controversial parts to closely resemble other translations, including Porokhova's. For example, she translated ayat 9.5 as "Kogda zh zapretnye chetyre mesiatsa proidut, to ubivaite mnogobozhnikov nevernykh vezde, gde b vy ikh ni nashli" - literally, "When the forbidden four months have passed, then kill the polytheists wherever you find them". Kuliyeve's translation is practically identical ["Kogda zhe zavershatsia zapretnye mesiatsy, to ubivaite mnogobozhnikov, gde by vi ikh ni obnaruzhili]. Abdullah Yusuf Ali's translation suggests they are close to the original: "But when the forbidden months are past, then fight and slay the Pagans wherever ye find them."

Even though Kuliyeve's translation so clearly resembles its peers, some Russian state representatives appear susceptible to claims that perceived theological errors in a translation amount to "extremism", however. Shortly after the Novorossiisk ruling was announced, Forum 18 suggested in a 20 September interview with Rashit Rafikov, the official dealing with religious affairs in Siberia's Krasnoyarsk Region, that it was a negative example of Russia's counter-"extremism" policy. "It's hard for me to judge," Rafikov replied. "When some people who are not specialists translate sacred texts, that won't do (..) I don't recommend Muslims acquiring some translations, as they diverge from what is orthodox, correct. There should be certain norms when translating sacred texts." (END)

For more background, see Forum 18's surveys of the general state of religious freedom in Russia at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1722, and of the dramatic decline in religious freedom related to Russia's Extremism Law at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1724.

The Economist's review of Geraldine Fagan's book "Believing in Russia - Religious Policy after Communism" (Routledge, 2013) is available here <http://www.economist.com/news/books-and-arts/21571111-new-look-religion-post-1991-russia-question-faith>. The book's comprehensive overview of Russian religious policy argues that continuing failure to resolve the question of whether Russia is to be an Orthodox country with religious minorities or a multi-confessional state is destabilising the nation.

An analysis of the way that the Russian authorities have used the Pussy Riot case to intensify restrictions on freedom of religion or belief is at F18News 15 October 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1754.

A personal commentary by Alexander Verkhovsky, Director of the SOVA Center for Information and Analysis <http://www.sova-center.ru>, about the systemic problems of Russian anti-extremism legislation, is at F18News 19 July 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1468.

A personal commentary by Irina Budkina, Editor of the <http://www.samstar.ucoz.ru> Old Believer website, about continuing denial of equality to Russia's religious minorities, is at F18News 26 May 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=570.

More 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://education.nationalgeographic.com/mapping/outline-map/?map=Russia>.

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