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RUSSIA: Muslim human rights activist linked to Hizb ut-Tahrir?

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

Mufti Ismagil Shangareyev, who heads the Central Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of Orenburg Region and the Moscow-based Islamic Human Rights Centre, has accused police of planting Hizb ut-Tahrir documents on him, after a search of his former Al-Furkan madrassah. "There's not even any sense in saying that they were planted – it's as clear as daylight," Shangareyev told Forum 18 News Service. His lawyer is Anatoli Pchelintsev of the Slavic Centre for Law and Justice, which stated that "the situation surrounding Ismagil Shangareyev" is a characteristic example of how the organs of the Interior Ministry and public prosecutors in various Russian regions subject Muslims to humiliation and undermine religious believers' trust in the authorities and the law." No formal charges have been brought against Shangareyev, who maintains that he does not and has never had any prohibited item in his apartment, car or office. He remains a witness in the criminal investigation opened after the discovery of the leaflets.

Mufti Ismagil Shangareyev, who heads the Central Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of Orenburg Region and the Moscow-based Islamic Human Rights Centre, has accused police of planting Hizb ut-Tahrir documents on him. On 17 March he told Forum 18 News Service that a 14 March police search of his former Al-Furkan madrassah building in Buguruslan (Orenburg region) had "uncovered," as he put it, Hizb ut-Tahrir leaflets: "There's not even any sense in saying that they were planted – it's as clear as daylight."

Hizb ut-Tahrir is an Islamic political party claiming to reject violence, which has had many of its members imprisoned in Central Asia (see F18News 29 October 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=170 and 16 February 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=253). Forum 18 notes the presence in Hizb ut-Tahrir publications of violently antisemitic views, and its denial of key human rights including religious freedom (see F18News 10 April http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=755).

The organisation has been banned as a terrorist group by Russia's Supreme Court (see F18News 10 April 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=755 and http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=756). Many of those charged in Russia with membership – 46 of whom have been convicted, and 29 of whom have been jailed – maintain that they are being persecuted for their religious beliefs by the authorities (see F18News 18 April 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=761).

During previous searches of the Al-Furkan madrassah, Orenburg police reportedly seized a pornographic magazine, a small quantity of explosives and a large number of religious books – which, as is now common in such cases (see F18News 20 April 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=765) are currently undergoing expert literary analysis in Kazan (Tatarstan). Orenburg regional FSB security service has maintained that several ex-pupils of the madrassah – which has not functioned since 2004 after explosives were discovered at it – went on to participate in terrorist attacks in Russia, including the September 2004 Beslan school siege (see F18News 8 February 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=723).

In his recent statement, however, Shangareyev points out that "even if you were to make the hypothesis in your wildest dreams that I am the member of a jamaat [usually understood in Russia as an Islamist terrorist cell] or a representative of bin Laden, I would at the very least have the sense not to keep explosives or leaflets or a pornographic magazine in a madrassah." Stating that he does not and has never had any prohibited item in his apartment, car or office, the Muslim leader also requests that, "if there should nevertheless appear information that something banned has been found on my property, please regard that "something" to be planted."

On 27 March local police led by Orenburg regional anti-terrorism investigator Andrei Volder did indeed conduct a search of Shangareyev's Moscow apartment, seizing his computer hard disk, several CDs, religious brochures and videocassettes. Shangareyev's lawyer, Anatoli Pchelintsev of the Moscow-based Slavic Centre for Law and Justice, was present during the search.

Speaking to Forum 18 on 18 April, Pchelintsev said that to date no formal charges have been brought against Shangareyev, so that he remains a witness in the criminal investigation opened following the discovery of the leaflets. "He's currently abroad and is afraid to return to Russia – with good reason." According to Pchelintsev, police searched a room in a Moscow communal apartment belonging to Shangareyev several days after searching his apartment but did not uncover anything illegal.

In a 28 March statement, the Slavic Centre for Law and Justice maintained that the situation surrounding Ismagil Shangareyev "is a characteristic example of how the organs of the Interior Ministry and public prosecutors in various Russian regions subject Muslims to humiliation and undermine religious believers' trust in the authorities and the law. It is happening because criminal cases, brought with violations of a whole range of legal norms, are inevitably leading law enforcement personnel down a blind alley."

At a 3 April Orenburg press conference, Andrei Volder reportedly told journalists that the material seized from Shangareyev's apartment included photocopies of the "Book of Monotheism" and "religious disks," as well as "eight disks containing erotic scenes – it is not prohibited to keep them, but in my view there is no reason for them to be in a mufti's home." Regnum Information Agency's report of the press conference noted that Volder's police department was not then pressing charges against Shangareyev.

The eighteenth-century "Book of Monotheism" by Mohammed ibn Abdul-Wahhab was banned by a Moscow district court in April 2004. In July 2004 Uralpolit.ru news website reported that, fearing prosecution, some Muslims in the city of Tyumen decided to burn their copies of the work, which they had received free of charge some years earlier. The author's name underlies the popular and very loose use of the term "Wahhabism" for militant Islam throughout the former Soviet Union.

Also on 3 April, Interfax news agency reported Andrei Volder as saying that the literature and disks seized from Shangareyev's Moscow apartment had been sent for religious studies expert analysis to ascertain whether they contained extremist material. Responding to Shangareyev's accusation that the police officers did not take off their coats during the search because they intended to plant evidence, he maintained that this was in fact due to "the elementary unpleasantness of the apartment – to pay this particular attention is simply to seek any excuse to try and find us guilty of provocations."

In a separate 3 April report, Interfax maintained that Shangareyev had responded to the possibility that the religious literature seized from his apartment might be found to be extremist with scepticism: "You can equate even the Koran and the Bible with extremist literature by quoting them out of context." Regarding the discovery of the erotic film, Shangareyev reportedly remarked that he granted Volder's police department "the right to use their imagination - let them look for whatever they like, as long as they stop accusing me of extremism."

While not linked by the authorities with Hizb ut-Tahrir, Ismagil Shangareyev's brother, Astrakhan-based Muslim activist Mansur Shangareyev, is currently facing charges of inciting religious hatred for "actively adhering to a radical trend of Islam, differing from traditional Islam by preaching the superiority of the given trend" and "spreading the idea of the creation in the world of a United Muslim state 'Caliphate'." His lawyer, Vladimir Ryakhovsky of the Slavic Centre for Law and Justice, has insisted to Forum 18 that extremist literature, ammunition and drugs seized from his home by police were planted (see F18News 8 February 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=723). (END)

For a personal commentary by an Old Believer about continuing denial of equality to Russia's religious minorities see F18News 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=509

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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