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The Utilization of Islam in Russia's Foreign Policy: Pathways of Engagement Between Muslim Russia and the States of the Gulf Cooperation Council

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Abstract

This study draws on the concept of soft power to analyze Russia's interactions with the member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). It offers a framework for understanding the utilization of Islam in Russian foreign policy in the Middle East under Putin. Concretely, it argues that the religious identities that Russia perceives to be shared between its Muslim-majority regions and the Arab Gulf states have been strategically selected for utilization. The study argues that dimensions of this utilization of Islam include interactions between Russia's Muslim-majority regions and the GCC states, alongside efforts by religious organizations, business associations, and non-government organizations to promote policies at the federal level that advance Russia's ties with the Gulf countries. This strategy, underway since the early 2000s, has assisted Russia in its efforts to promote its security, political and economic interests in the Gulf.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Aims and Methodology

Under the leadership of Vladimir Putin, Russia has renewed its focus on the Middle East as part of a long-term strategy of nurturing multipolarity, something Putin foreshadowed during his speech at the Munich Security Conference in February 2007.⁽¹⁾ Alongside the exercise of hard military power (as exemplified by Russian involvement in the Syrian and Libyan civil wars), Moscow has actively used soft power to engage with Middle Eastern states. Indeed, President Putin himself affirmed the importance of soft power in foreign policy in an editorial he penned for *Russia Today* (RT) in the run-up to the Russian presidential elections in 2012.⁽²⁾ For example, Russia has boosted its soft power outreach in the Middle East through media outlets like RT Arabic, which launched in 2007, and the Russian federal agency responsible for the Russian diaspora, commonly known as “Rossotrudnichestvo,” which operates Russian cultural centers (in the mold of Germany’s Goethe-Institut, China’s Confucius Institute, or the British Council), in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Morocco, Egypt, Tunisia, and the Palestinian territories.⁽³⁾ These soft power initiatives are aligned with the country’s pragmatic approach to maintaining relations with all sides, including balancing adversaries, as part of its diplomatic efforts.⁽⁴⁾

This study draws on the notion of soft power introduced by Joseph Nye, who defined it as the ability to use “attraction, rather than coercion,” to achieve foreign policy objectives. According to Nye, a country’s soft power draws on three key sources: its political values, its culture, and its foreign policies.⁽⁵⁾ Regarding diplomatic relations, the present study analyzes religion as a part of national culture. Religion can be seen as part of a shared Muslim identity between the GCC member states and Russia, which is home to 25 million Muslims, according to some estimates.⁽⁶⁾

(1) “Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy (2007-02-10),” *Presidency of the Russian Federation*, accessed September 29, 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/copy/24034>.

(2) “Russia and the Changing World,” *Russia Today*, February 27, 2012, <https://www.rt.com/russia/official-word/putin-russia-changing-world-263/>.

(3) Shay Attias, “Russian Soft Power in the Middle East,” *BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,238*, July 26, 2019, <https://besacenter.org/russian-soft-power-middle-east/>.

(4) Diana Galeeva, “How Have Russia’s Policies in the Middle East Changed Since the Arab Uprisings?” *Middle East Institute*, April 21, 2021, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/how-have-russias-policies-middle-east-changed-arab-uprisings-0>.

(5) Joseph Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2009), 11.

(6) “Islam in Russia: By 2020, Muslims are Expected to Account for One-Fifth of the Population,” *Aljazeera.com*, March 7, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2018/3/7/islam-in-russia>.

At its core, this research asks how Russia and the member states of the GCC — especially Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) — have nurtured cooperation via soft power and the role shared identities have played within this process. This core question gives rise to several subsidiary lines of inquiry, including the role played by the Muslim-majority republics of the Russian Federation (Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, Chechnya, Dagestan, and Ingushetia) in bringing Moscow and the GCC member states together, drawing on religious history and personal diplomacy. Additionally, it analyzes how the activities of religious organizations (such as the Religious Board of Muslims of the Russian Federation - DUMRF) with close links to the federal and regional governments in Russia have contributed to developing political and cultural ties between Russia and GCC states. In this vein, the study explores the ways in which the “Russia–Islamic World Group of Strategic Vision”—a public diplomacy platform of the Kremlin led by Russian Muslims—has contributed to the strengthening of ties between Russia and the Muslim world. Finally, it explores the role of business associations, such as the Association of Muslim Entrepreneurs of the Russian Federation (AME RF), in promoting commercial and trade links between Russia and the Gulf.

In attempting to address these questions, the study adds to a substantial body of literature on the role of Islam in the development of relations between Moscow and the Arab states of the Middle East, dating back to the Soviet era.⁽⁷⁾ However, it differs from this literature in three critical ways. First, while providing historical context with regard to Moscow’s utilization of Islam in its foreign relations, the study focuses specifically on the era of Vladimir Putin. Second, it offers a framework for understanding the multiple ways Russian Muslims have engaged with the GCC member states. Finally, the study is broad and multi-sited, analyzing several case studies supplemented by data from a range of primary and secondary sources in several relevant languages (Bashkir, Tatar, Arabic, Russian, and English), as well as 15 semi-structured interviews conducted with high-ranking political elites and stakeholders of the aforementioned Muslim-majority republics, the leadership of the “Russia–Islamic World Group of Strategic Vision,” the ARE RF, and representatives of Islamic organizations. These interviews took

(7) See, for example, Vitaly Naumkin, *Nesostoyavsheesya partnerstvo: Sovetskaya diplomatiya v Saudovskoi Arabii mehdru mirovymi voynami* [*Failed Partnership: Soviet Diplomacy in Saudi Arabia Between the World Wars*] (Moscow: Aspect Press, 2018); Oleg Ozerov, *Karim Khakimov: letopis' zhini* [*Karim Khakimov: Chronicle of His Life*] (LitRes: Samizdat, 2020); L.Z. Gadilov and F.H. Gumerov, *Kerim Khakimov* (Ufa: Bashknigoizdat, 1966); Nikolay Kozhanov (editor), *Russia's Relations with the GCC and Iran* (Palgrave Macmillan: Singapore, 2021); Karina Fayzullina, “Interpreting Russian Foreign Policy and Islam,” *Aljazeera Centre for Studies*, September 28, 2014, <https://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2014/09/2014928101146511560.html>.

place in Tatarstan (February and December 2020; August and December 2021), Bashkortostan (February 2020), Dagestan (February 2020) and Moscow (February 2020).

1.2. Historical Background

Russia's utilization of Islam as part of a soft power strategy under Putin's leadership has been animated by domestic security concerns and efforts to transform what it perceives as an American-dominated unipolar world into a multipolar one.⁽⁸⁾ Russia has sought to deepen relations with GCC states to achieve these twin goals, and this posture is, in part, driven by the strategic importance of the GCC states in the global energy system. As is well known, the GCC countries are among the most significant energy exporters worldwide, creating incentives for Russia—for now, an energy superpower—to coordinate, notably in the frameworks of OPEC and OPEC+.⁽⁹⁾

Moreover, the special status of the GCC member states in the Islamic world, particularly Saudi Arabia, which holds custodianship of the holy cities of Mecca and Medinah, is of interest to the Russian leadership, especially in light of Russia's sizable Muslim population. As a result, during the Putin era, Russia's Muslims have—through cultural channels, cross-national institutions, and individual diplomacy—become a key element in Russia's policy of engagement with the GCC member states.

This strategy of leveraging perceptions of shared Muslim identity is particularly similar to the Soviet policies in 1920s-1930s. Under the Romanov dynasty, the imperial decree of 16 May 1681 enshrined a policy of intolerance toward Muslims. During the reign of Peter I (1682–1725), the forcible Christianization of Turkic-speaking populations, the destruction of mosques, and the

(8) For example, Dmitri Trenin links Russia's goals in the Middle East in the context of a wider set of global geostrategic objectives Moscow seeks to accomplish. See Dmitri Trenin, *What is Russia Up to in the Middle East?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018). Similarly, Andrei Tsygankov has analyzed Russian foreign policy strategy in the current century through the prism of Putin's ambition to restore Russia's great power status. See Andrei P. Tsygankov, "Vladimir Putin's Vision of Russia as a Normal Great Power," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 21:2, 2005, 132–158, <https://doi.org/10.2747/1060-586X.21.2.132>. Alina Polyakova takes a similar view, analyzing Russia's intervention in the Syrian conflict in geostrategic terms. See Alina Polyakova, "Russia Is a Great Power Once Again," *The Atlantic*, February 26, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/02/russia-syria-putin-assad-trump-isis-ghouta/554270/7>. Finally, Marlène Laruelle draws attention to the fact that "Islam constitutes an integral part of Russia's history and culture, and the Putin regime regularly celebrates Islam's contribution to the country and its great power reassertion." See Marlène Laruelle, "Russia's Islam: Balancing Securitization and Integration," *Russie.Nei.Visions*, No. 125, Ifri, December 2021, 4, https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/laruelle_russia_islam_2021.pdf.

(9) Peter Rutland, "Russia as an Energy Superpower," *New Political Economy*, 13:2, 2008, 203–210, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13563460802018547>.

persecution of clerics led to the suppression of Islam and its subsequent exclusion from public life. However, this policy was reviewed under Catherine II (1762–1796). After an imperial visit to Kazan in 1767, she ended the practice of forced baptism and granted the Tatars the right to erect mosques. In 1788, the first official organization of Russian Muslims was founded, the Orenburg Muslim Spiritual Assembly. Drawing on material from Catherine the Great's Instructions to the Legislative Commission in 1767, it becomes evident that the Tatars involved in the Orenburg Assembly, while representing different locales and communities, acted as a united front in defending their collective religious rights as Muslims.

One of their long-standing demands was the issuance of passports to enable free travel to Mecca.⁽¹⁰⁾ However, it was only in 1803, during the reign of Alexander I (1801–1825), that this lobbying bore fruit, with the Bukharans living in Russia given passports to undertake the hajj.⁽¹¹⁾ Throughout the nineteenth century, Russian officials and diplomats debated whether to allow more of their Muslim subjects to go on hajj.⁽¹²⁾ There were concerns that “the hajj brings Turkey enormous material benefits from donations [...] used for military needs” and that “during the hajj, various epidemic diseases appeared and developed, mainly cholera and the plague.”⁽¹³⁾ Anxieties about the transnational solidarities that might be built between foreign (namely Ottoman) and local Muslims—especially those from the recently conquered territories in Central Asia—also played a role. All of these concerns led to cyclical pauses in the issuance of passports during the Tsarist era. In 1898, for example, only 450 Russian Muslims were permitted to travel.⁽¹⁴⁾

While the Tsarist government was cautious about its Muslim subjects, the Soviets consciously sought to utilize Islam in their foreign relations. In the 1920s, the People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (NKID) was tasked with

(10) R. M. Mukhametshin, “Islam v tatarskom obšestve: poisk putej vyživaniya i obnovleniya [Islam in Tatar society: The search for ways of survival and renewal],” in *Islam i musulmanskaya kultura v srednem povolzhie: Istoriya i sovremennost (Očerki) [Islam and Muslim Culture in the Middle Volga Region: Past and Present (Essays)]*, edited by R. M. Mukhametshin (Kazan: Master Line, 2001), 96–101; Ildar Nurimanov, “Hajj Musulman Rossii. Iz proshlogo k nastoyzshemu [Hajj of Russian Muslims: From past to present],” *Medina Publishing House*, January 28, 2009, accessed September 29, 2022, http://www.idmedina.ru/books/history_culture/hajj/1/nurimanov.htm.

(11) U. Arapov, *Islam v Rossiyskoy imperii (zakonodatelnye akty, opisaniya, statistika) [Islam in the Russian Empire (Legislative Acts, Descriptions, Statistics)]* (Moscow, 2001).

(12) Nurimanov, “Hajj Musulman.”

(13) Nurimanov, “Hajj Musulman.”

(14) “O hajje russkih musulman i o sanitarnyh usloviyah palomnichestva [The Hajj of Russian Muslims and the Sanitary Conditions of the Pilgrimage],” *Medina Publishing House*, accessed September 29, 2022, http://www.idmedina.ru/books/history_culture/hajj/2/glava-5.htm.

establishing contacts with the Arab world, whose population, after Turkey's defeat in the Great War (1914–1918), found itself under the rule of various colonial mandates.⁽¹⁵⁾ At the Lausanne conference held in December 1922, for instance, the Russian delegation reached out to its Hijazi counterparts, facilitating the normalization of diplomatic ties.⁽¹⁶⁾ This Soviet attempt to “penetrate Mecca,” as described by Georgy Chicherin, was boosted by the explicit appointment of Muslim diplomats (for instance, a Muslim Tatar commander Karim Khakimov) and the widespread use of religious organizations and authorities by the Soviet Union as mechanisms for advancing collaboration with Arab states.

One salient example of this Soviet strategy was the World Muslim Congress in Mecca convened in June–July 1926, where King ‘Abdulaziz sought to position himself as the guardian of the holy cities after his conquest of the Hijaz. During this event, the Soviet delegation was comprised mainly of members drawn from the Central Muslim Spiritual Board of Internal Russia and Siberia (TsDUM). Mufti Riza Fakhretdin, the head of the Soviet delegation, was elected as one of the two co-chairmen of the World Muslim Congress. This fact underscores the crucial role Soviet Muslims aspired to play and illustrates, to some extent, their success in facilitating relations between their homeland and the Arab world.

However, this positive Soviet approach to Islam proved to be short-lived. In fact, most of the abovementioned Muslim diplomats and clergy were heavily persecuted for much of the Stalinist era.⁽¹⁷⁾ Even in the 1970s, when the Soviets began to reconsider their strategy as part of an effort to normalize relations with Arab states (notably Saudi Arabia), the extent of engagement never reached the level of the 1920s and early 1930s.⁽¹⁸⁾ In 1974, the mufti of Tashkent, Ziauddin Babakhanov, led a Soviet Muslim delegation to Mecca for the hajj and was received by King Faisal and by the head of the Muslim World League.⁽¹⁹⁾ Babakhanov also traveled to Abu Dhabi and met with Shaykh Zayed al-Nahyan.⁽²⁰⁾ The mufti likewise tried—with the permission of

(15) Naumkin, *Nesostoyavsheesya partnerstvo*, 72–73.

(16) Gadilov and Gumerov, *Kerim Khakimov*, 105.

(17) Yulia N. Guseva, “*Mrachnoe echo ‘Dela TsDUM’: ‘Cep’ Korana’ I Repressii protiv msusl'manskoy elity v SSSR (1940)* [The Gloomy Echo of the “TsDUM Affair”: “The Chain of the Quran” and the Repressions Against the Muslim Elite in the USSR (1940)],” *Novyi Istoriceskij Vestnik*, 52:2, 2017, 85–102.

(18) Alexandre Bennigsen, Paul B. Henze, George K. Tanham, and S. Enders Wimbush, *Soviet Strategy and Islam* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989), 35, 38.

(19) Bennigsen et al., *Soviet Strategy and Islam*, 50–52.

(20) Bennigsen et al., *Soviet Strategy and Islam*, 44.

Soviet authorities—to facilitate international Muslim gatherings. For instance, to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the journal *Muslims of the Soviet East*, an international conference was organized in Tashkent on 3 July 1979.⁽²¹⁾ Chaired by the mufti, the conference was attended by high-ranking delegates from the Middle East, including representatives from the Arabian Peninsula, most notably from Kuwait.⁽²²⁾ The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 largely derailed these efforts and severely limited Moscow’s scope for utilizing Islam in diplomacy.⁽²³⁾

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russian Muslims reconnected with the wider Muslim world and were affected by the spread of new religious discourses and practices.⁽²⁴⁾ In the 1990s and 2000s, these global influences penetrated Chechnya and the North Caucasus region, where separatists proclaimed a jihad against the Russian state.⁽²⁵⁾ In prosecuting the Second Chechen War lasting from August 1999 to April 2009, Putin’s rise to power was defined by his political and military campaigns to suppress these challenges to state authority.



King Salman and head of Tatarstan, Rustam Minnikhanov⁽²⁶⁾

(21) The journal was established in 1968 by the Muslim Religious Board for Central Asia and Kazakhstan and was the only publication dealing with Muslim affairs officially sanctioned by the Soviet government. The journal was published in Uzbek and languages such as Arabic, Farsi, and Dari (but only in Russian from 1990) as well as French and English. For further details, see <https://www.eastview.com/resources/journals/muslims-soviet-east/>.

(22) J. G. Tewari, *Muslims Under The Czars and the Soviets* (Lucknow: Academy of Islamic Research and Publications, 1984), 413.

(23) Bennigsen et al., *Soviet Strategy*, 57–65.

(24) Alexey Malashenko, “Islam in Russia,” *Carnegie Moscow Center*, September 23, 2014, <https://carnegie.ru/2014/09/23/islam-in-russia-pub-57048>.

(25) Andrej Kreutz, *Russia in the Middle East: Friend or Foe?* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2009).

(26) “King Salman receives presidents of Ingushetia, Chechen and Tatarstan Republics,” *Saudi Gazette*, October 7, 2017, <https://saudigazette.com.sa/article/518821/SAUDI-ARABIA/King-Salman>.

Once victory over the separatists was achieved, Putin's regime re-framed Islam from being a security concern to a source of soft power. The Kremlin drew regional Islamic leaders into the state and sought to reconcile with Muslim populations that felt aggrieved by the central government's harsh crackdown. Moreover, sensing the anti-American sentiment in the Muslim world following the US invasion of Iraq in 2003,⁽²⁷⁾ the Kremlin came to view the leveraging of Islam as a "tactical move"⁽²⁸⁾ that dovetailed an emerging view of "good Islam"⁽²⁹⁾ to attract the GCC member states through shared Muslim identities.

Throughout the first decade of the twenty-first century, then, attention to Islam in connection to the quest for peace at home and multipolarity in the world informed the Russian leadership and its foreign policy strategy. In 2005, Russia gained official observer status at the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC).⁽³⁰⁾ In his speech at the opening of a two-day Malaysia summit of the OIC in 2003, Putin explained the reasons for applying for this status, highlighting that despite secessionist attempts, Russia's Muslim population was "an inseparable, full-fledged, and active part of the multiethnic and multidenominational nation of Russia." He added that "Russia, as a unique Eurasian power, had always played a special role in building relations between East and West."⁽³¹⁾ Alexey Malashenko explains that Russia's move to join the OIC was to "find a place for itself in the world and compensate for worsened relations with the West by a more active policy in other regions." Moreover, Malashenko notes, "After Vladimir Putin came to power, the Moslem vector of Russia's policy increased."⁽³²⁾ Further, in another famous speech at the 43rd Munich Conference on Security Policy in 2007, Putin stated that unipolarity was impossible in today's world and that such a model of international relations "itself [was] flawed."⁽³³⁾ During

(27) Today, there is a growing perception of American withdrawal from the Gulf and the wider Middle East. As a result, other actors, including Russia, have developed closer ties in the region. See William F. Wechsler, "US Withdrawal from the Middle East: Perceptions and Reality," in *The MENA Region: A Great Power Competition*, edited by Karim Mezran and Arturo Varvelli (ISPI: Milan, 2019); Steven A. Cook, "Trump's Middle East Legacy is Failure," *Foreign Policy*, October 28, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/10/28/trumps-middle-east-legacy-is-failure/>. At the same time, as scholars have noted, Russia is neither willing or able to play the role the United States traditionally has played in the region. See Dimitar Bechev, Nicu Popescu and Stanislav Secieru (editors), *Russia Rising: Putin's Foreign Policy in the Middle East and North Africa* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021).

(28) A. Malashenko, "The Islam Factor in Russia's Foreign Policy," *Russia in Global Affairs*, 5:3, 2007 (July/September), <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/the-islam-factor-in-russias-foreign-policy/>.

(29) Laruelle, "Russia's Islam," 6.

(30) Kreutz, *Russia in the Middle East*, 44–45.

(31) Sophie Lambroschini, "Russia: Putin Tells OIC That Muslims Are Inseparable Part of A Multiethnic Nation," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, October 16, 2003, <https://www.rferl.org/a/1104687.html>.

(32) Malashenko, "Islam Factor."

(33) "Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy (2007-02-10)," *Presidency of the Russian Federation*, accessed September 29, 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/copy/24034>.

a Middle East tour that same year, he visited Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Jordan, identifying these Arab states as important partners in the project of bringing about multipolarity in global affairs and facilitating the integration of Russia's Muslim populations.⁽³⁴⁾

2. Pathways of Engagement Between Russia's Muslim Minorities and the Gulf States

2.1. *Para-diplomacy of the Muslim-Majority Republics of the Russian Federation*

Russia has two major Muslim population centers, the North Caucasus and the Tataro–Bashkir (or Volga) region. Islam has a long history in the North Caucasus, dating from the seventh century when it began to spread among the Lezgins of southern Dagestan.⁽³⁵⁾ By the end of the fifteenth century, most Dagestanis accepted the Shafi'i school of Sunni Islam. Shafi'i Islam spread among the Vaynakhs, the indigenous population of Chechnya and Ingushetia, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Additionally, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it spread into Kabarda and then to Ossetia. In contrast to Dagestan and Chechnya, the mountain peoples of the Western Caucasus adopted the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam. The majority of Muslims in the North Caucasus are Sunni, but there is also a Shia population located mainly on the northwestern shore of the Caspian Sea. It is estimated that the city of Derbent (in Dagestan) has the largest Shia community in Dagestan, while 2,000 Shia Muslims live in the Kizlyar region.⁽³⁶⁾ The North Caucasus (Dagestan, Chechnya, and Ingushetia) is home to various Sufi tariqas, including Qadiriyya, Naqshbandiyya, and Shadhiliyya.⁽³⁷⁾

According to Galina Yemelianova, who draws heavily on the work of Russian Islamic academics Vladimir Godlevskii and Egor Kovalevskii, Central Asian merchants played a crucial role in the Islamization of the Tataro–Bashkir region, introducing Volga Bulgars to the Hanafi school.⁽³⁸⁾ A delegation led by Ahmad Ibn Fadlan, sent by the Abbasid caliph Jaffar al-Muqtadir in

(34) Kreutz, *Russia in the Middle East*.

(35) Galina Yemelianova, "Islam in Russia: An Historical Perspective," in *Islam in Post-Soviet Russia: Public and Private Faces*, edited by Hilary Pilkington and Galina Yemelianova (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003).

(36) Diana Galeeva, "Identity is a Central Factor in Russia-Iran Relations," *Gulf International Forum*, July 23, 2022, <https://gulffif.org/identity-is-a-central-factor-in-russia-iran-relations/>.

(37) Mikhail Roshchin, "Sufism and Fundamentalism in Dagestan and Chechnya," *CEMOTI, Cahiers d'Études sur la Méditerranée Orientale et le monde Turco-Iranien*, 38, 2004, 61–72, https://www.persee.fr/doc/cemot_0764-9878_2004_num_38_1_1742.

(38) Yemelianova, "Islam in Russia," 16–17.

922, is said to have marked the acceptance of Islam in the region.⁽³⁹⁾ Thus, in 2022, Russian Muslims, particularly at Tataro-Bashkir center of Islam, hosted celebrations marking the 1100th anniversary of Ibn Fadlan's arrival.

2.1.1. The Republics of the North Caucasus

Given this centuries-long history of ties to the Muslim world, it is hardly surprising that both Muslim populated areas – the North Caucasus and the Tataro–Bashkir (or Volga) region - play a key para-diplomatic role in boosting relations between modern Russia and the GCC member states. That being said, neither any federal subjects nor regions of the Russian Federation can undertake independent external economic or political activities under the current legislative framework. In 1996, the president of Russia assigned the Ministry of Foreign Affairs with coordinating functions in matters of foreign relations involving these regions, and since 2004, they have been obliged to obtain the consent of the ministry prior to concluding international economic agreements.⁽⁴⁰⁾ This suggests that all actions undertaken by the republics in their engagements with the GCC member states should be understood as a form of para-diplomacy. Moreover, as part of a federal system, they are best conceived as channels of soft power diplomacy in matters selected by the Kremlin.

Ramzan Kadyrov, Chechnya's leader, supports Putin's policies and has been referred to as "Russia's top diplomat" in the Middle East.⁽⁴¹⁾ He was the only head of Russia's nine Muslim regions to accompany Putin during his official visits to Saudi Arabia and the UAE in 2019.⁽⁴²⁾ Kadyrov's importance for the federal government has mainly been predicated on his personal contacts with leaders and the authorities across the Muslim world, which was dependent, in turn, on the networks built by his father, Ahmad Kadyrov. The latter was a respected spiritual leader who interrupted his studies in Oman in 1991 to join the rebellion in Chechnya, where he rose to the key position of mufti. From that position, he proclaimed jihad against Russia in 1995, but after four years, he switched to the side of Putin, then prime minister, who launched a war in

(39) Ravil Bukharaev, *Islam in Russia: The Four Seasons* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 2000).

(40) Denis Stremouuhov, "Mechhdunarodnaya deyatel'nost rossiyskiikh gubernatorov: mechdu avtonomie b zavisimost'u [International activity of Russian governors: between autonomy and dependence]," *Riddle*, November 1, 2020, <https://www.ridl.io/ru/mezhhdunarodnaja-aktivnost-rossijskih-gubernatorov-mezhdu-avtonomiej-i-zavisimostju/>.

(41) Pavel Luzin, "Ramzan Kadyrov: Russia's Top Diplomat," *Riddle*, April 19, 2018, <https://www.ridl.io/en/ramzan-kadyrov-russias-top-diplomat/>.

(42) "Kadyrov: visit Putina v Er-Riyad ukrepiy sotrudnichsetvo dvuh stran [Kadyrov: Putin's Visit to Riyadh Will Strengthen Cooperation Between the Two Countries]," *RIA Novosti*, October 14, 2019, <https://ria.ru/20191014/1559766501.html>.

Chechnya in October 1999.⁽⁴³⁾ Ramzan Kadyrov was able to draw upon his father's reputation in the Muslim world to build diverse personal links with foreign Muslim stakeholders in the first decade of the twenty-first century, thereby boosting the Kremlin's soft power policies. The Chechen Republic's para-diplomacy efforts thus rely heavily on its leader, whom one scholar dubbed "a charismatic regional autocrat."⁽⁴⁴⁾ Kadyrov's relations with the GCC leaders have become so close that he has referred to them as "brothers" in public settings.⁽⁴⁵⁾

Harnessing these personal networks to its advantage, the Chechnyan leadership has organized various religious forums and conferences, allowing it to bring influential Islamic scholars from the Muslim world to Russia. For example, in March 2019, Moscow and Grozny hosted the International Conference on Principles of Mercy and Peace in Religious Values, which was "the first of its kind in the history of Russia under government patronage."⁽⁴⁶⁾ However, given that there is no singular state-led Islamic authority in modern Russia concerning legal or theological issues, such conferences serve political purposes. The conference was held during a political crisis among the Gulf states and was useful in advancing relations with the UAE. The conference identified Salafism/Wahhabism as a dangerous and misguided sect and called out groups for being extremist, including ISIS, Hizb ut-Tahrir, and the Muslim Brotherhood.

There has been an alignment between Chechnya and Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt. This alignment, especially with the UAE, can be explained as a reaction to the hostility espoused toward Russia by the spiritual head of the Muslim Brotherhood, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, a Qatar-aligned Muslim religious scholar. Commenting on Putin's support of the al-Assad regime in Syria, al-Qaradawi said in a speech given in 2011 that "Arabs and the Islamic world must declare a boycott of Russia. We must regard Russia as our enemy number one."⁽⁴⁷⁾ Ramzan

(43) "Kadyrov Had Enemies in Chechnya and Russia," *The Irish Times*, May 9, 2004, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/kadyrov-had-enemies-in-chechnya-and-russia-1.978780>.

(44) Elena Rodina and Dmitry Dligach, "Dictator's Instagram: Personal and Political Narratives in a Chechen Leader's Social Network," *Caucasus Survey*, 7:2, 2019, 95, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23761199.2019.1567145>.

(45) "Kadyrov v Abu-Dhabi obsudit ukreplenie otnosheniy mechdy OAE i Chechney [Kadyrov in Abu Dhabi to Discuss Strengthening Relations Between the UAE and Chechnya]," *RIA Novosti*, February 17, 2019, <https://ria.ru/20190217/1550989847.html>.

(46) "The Muslim World League Launches its International Conference in Moscow with the Participation of 43 Countries," *Muslim World League*, March 30, 2019, <https://themwl.org/en/node/36002>.

(47) Mairbek Vatchagaev, "Chechen and Ingush Leaders Feud over Burial of Slain Insurgents," *Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume: 9 Issue: 210*, November 15, 2012, <https://jamestown.org/program/chechen-and-ingush-leaders-feud-over-burial-of-slain-insurgents-2/>.

Kadyrov was the first to condemn al-Qaradawi's speech, describing it as "blasphemous" and directed against millions of Muslims in Russia.⁽⁴⁸⁾ Chechnya has since frozen its relations with Qatar while boosting its ties with leaders of the Quartet.

These developments have been reflected in the political and economic realms. Kadyrov has made multiple visits to the UAE and has succeeded in securing investments and aid for Chechnya, most notably the building of "The Local," a five-star hotel, and the construction of the Grozny International University.⁽⁴⁹⁾ In 2017, the Emirati Shaykh Zayed Foundation established a presence in Chechnya to support entrepreneurship and innovation in a deal worth US\$50 million.⁽⁵⁰⁾ As Moscow moved to reduce subsidies to Chechnya in 2017, such close cooperation with the UAE has proved vital for the local economy.⁽⁵¹⁾ In 2019, Leonid Slutsky, chairman of the State Duma Committee on International Affairs, commented that Russia appreciated the UAE's economic support for Chechnya.⁽⁵²⁾ During the COVID-19 pandemic, the UAE dispatched five medical aid planes to Chechnya, carrying over 30 metric tons of medical supplies and 20,000 testing kits, benefiting 31,300 medical professionals.⁽⁵³⁾

As Chechnya developed closer relations with the Quartet leadership, Ingushetia took a different tack, focusing on Qatar. During a visit to Doha in 2019, the former leader of Ingushetia, Yunus-bek Yevkurov, had an audience with Ali al-Qaradaghi, the secretary general of the International Union of Muslim Scholars (headed by Shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradawi).⁽⁵⁴⁾ Yevkurov's Instagram account reported: "I expressed gratitude to the Shaykh for his efforts to consolidate

(48) Vatchagaev, "Chechen and Ingush Leaders Feud over Burial of Slain Insurgents."

(49) "Kadyrov rasskazal ob investitsiyah Saudovskoy Aravii v ekonomu Chechni [Kadyrov Spoke About Saudi Arabia's Investments in the Economy of Chechnya]," *RIA Novosti*, October 18, 2019, <https://ria.ru/20191018/1559930045.html>; "Project Summary," *smbuil.ru*, accessed 14 October, 2022, <https://smbuil.ru/en/what-we-do/grozny-international-university7922/o-proekte-giu/>.

(50) Emirates News Agency (WAM), "Zayed Fund for Innovation and Entrepreneurship Launched in Chechnya," *aviamost.ae*, May 29, 2017, <https://aviamost.ae/en/zayed-fund-innovation-and-entrepreneurship-launched-chechnya>.

(51) Liz Fuller, "Chechen Leader Kadyrov Challenges Moscow Over Budget Subsidies," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, November 17, 2016, <https://www.rferl.org/a/chechnya-kadyrov-challenges-moscow-budget-subsidies/28123822.html>.

(52) Binsal Abdulkader, "Russian Official Appreciates UAE's support for Chechen Economy," October 17, 2019, <https://wam.ae/en/details/1395302795517>.

(53) Reliefweb, "UAE: Humanitarian aid and efforts to combat COVID-19," May 12, 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/uae-humanitarian-aid-and-efforts-combat-covid-19-12-may-2020-enar>

(54) Magomet Evloev, "Evkurov vstretilsya s generalnym sekretarem vseirnogo souza musulmanskih unchenyh Ali al-Qaradaghi, Gazeta Ingushetii," February 6, 2019, <https://gazetaingush.ru/news/evkurov-vstretilsya-s-generalnym-sekretarem-vsemirnogo-soyuza-musulmanskih-uchenyh-ali>.

Muslim society, for his contribution to strengthening stability in our region.”⁽⁵⁵⁾ Chechnya and Ingushetia’s contrasting approaches with the GCC member states during the aforementioned Gulf diplomatic crisis reflect well Russia’s foreign policy concept of “balancing adversaries”⁽⁵⁶⁾ and also points to the internal dynamics of competition between the republics and their attempts to draw upon different sources of support. The drawing of administrative borders between Chechnya and Ingushetia caused protests that began in October 2018 and continued until March 2019. These protests resulted in the resignation of Ingushetia’s leader two months later.⁽⁵⁷⁾

The Republic of Dagestan developed yet another mechanism for engagement with the Gulf states, relying on economic cooperation based on agreements ratified at the interstate level. As Gadzhiamin Ramaldanov, a former deputy minister of economy and territorial development of the Republic of Dagestan explained, an “unofficial” mechanism exists through Dagestan’s diaspora businessmen, who have become crucial in attempts to build relations with the GCC monarchies.⁽⁵⁸⁾ However, in recent years, trade with the Gulf states has remained low. Relations with the UAE mainly occur through businessmen,⁽⁵⁹⁾ while those with Saudi Arabia are via the Muftiate of Dagestan,⁽⁶⁰⁾ prioritizing shared identities. Nonetheless, due to Dagestan’s geographical proximity to Iran and the Shia traditions it shares with Iran, the republic’s para-diplomatic efforts are arguably more effective at strengthening Russian relations with Iran rather than with the GCC.⁽⁶¹⁾

(55) Evloev, “Evkurov vstretilsyas generalnym sekretarem vseirnogo souza musulmanskih unchenyh Ali al-Qaradaghi, Gazeta Ingushetii.”

(56) Mark N. Katz, “Better Than Before: Comparing Moscow’s Cold war and Putin Era Policies Toward Arabia and the Gulf,” Durham *Middle East papers Sir William Luce Publication Series*, 2018, <https://dro.dur.ac.uk/25863/1/25863.pdf>.

(57) Alexander Iskandaryan, “The Implications of Redrawing the Chechnya-Ingushetia Border,” *Ponars Eurasia*, December 11, 2019, <https://www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/implications-redrawing-chechnya-ingushetia-border>.

(58) Anonymous interviewee, interviewed by Diana Galeeva, 2020.

(59) For example, recent discussions have touched on the possibility that the UAE might source meat, juices, and tea from Dagestan and on cooperation in the field of tourism. See, for example, Shamil Kurbanov, “Obedinennye Arabskiye Emiraty izuchat vozmozhnost’ importirovaniya produkci Dagestana [UAE Will Study the Possibility of Importing Products from Dagestan],” *Ria Dagestan*, March 20, 2021, https://riadagestan.ru/news/economy/obedinennye_arabskie_emiraty_izuchat_vozmozhnost_importirovaniya_produktsii_dagestana/.

(60) Hajj logistics remain central to the relationship between Dagestan and Saudi Arabia. See Zaur Aliyev, “Korolevstvo Saudovskaja Aravija i Dagestan stali sotrudnicat’ v sfere turizma [Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Dagestan Have Begun Cooperation in the field of tourism],” *Ria Dagestan*, September 15, 2021, https://riadagestan.ru/news/society/korolevstvo_saudovskaya_araviya_i_dagestan_stali_sotrudnicat_v_sfere_turizma/.

(61) Galeeva, “Identity is a Central Factor.”

2.1.2. The Republics of Tatarstan and Bashkortostan

Tatarstan is an economically important region with developed oil, petrochemical, and manufacturing sectors; it is known for its Kamaz heavy-duty trucks and Mil Mi series of military helicopters. It is also one of the country's main agricultural centers.⁽⁶²⁾ Because of its economic importance, Tatarstan plays a significant role in Russia's outreach to the Muslim world, including the GCC member states. In 2014, Putin delegated the chairmanship of the "Russia–Islamic World Group of Strategic Vision" (for further details, see 2.2.1) to Rustam Minnikhanov, the head of Tatarstan since 2010.⁽⁶³⁾ The CEO of the Tatarstan Investment Development Agency, Taliya Minullina, explained that this meant Tatarstan was now responsible for developing the cooperation between Russian regions and OIC member states.⁽⁶⁴⁾ Moreover, Tatarstan's trade office in Dubai has established a solid track record as an official channel for cooperation between Tatarstan and the UAE.⁽⁶⁵⁾

Tatarstan also relies on the Kazan Summit — established in 2009 as a business platform to coordinate economic cooperation between the regions of the Russian Federation and the member states of the OIC, including the GCC states — for its outreach. In 2019, 86 representatives from almost all the GCC member states participated.⁽⁶⁶⁾ This platform has assisted Tatarstan in developing its local Islamic banking and finance sector, notably through cooperation with the OIC-affiliated Islamic Development Bank, which has further contributed to closer ties with Saudi Arabia.⁽⁶⁷⁾ Moreover, the UAE has emerged as a partner in developing Tatarstan's Islamic finance sector and halal-compliant industries.⁽⁶⁸⁾ At the same time, Tatarstan has also cultivated cordial relations with Qatar, exploring possible cooperation in the latter's hosting of the FIFA World Cup in late 2022 and in the hydrocarbon extraction and information technologies fields.⁽⁶⁹⁾ In evaluating whether any political issues, such as the aforementioned diplomatic crisis in

(62) "Welcome to the Republic of Tatarstan," *Official Portal of the Republic of Tartarstan*, accessed October 13, 2022, <https://tatarstan.ru/eng/about/welcome.htm>.

(63) "The Group of Strategic Vision 'Russia–Islamic World' Presents the Updated Development Strategy," *Russia–Islamic World*, June 11, 2019, accessed October 13, 2022, <https://russia-islworld.ru/en/novosti//the-group-of-strategic-vision-russia-islamic-world-presents-the-updated-development-strategy/>.

(64) Taliya Minullina, interviewed by Diana Galeeva, 2020.

(65) "Torgovo–Ekonomicheskoe predstavitel'stvo Tatarstan v Dubae [Trade-Economic Representative of Tatarstan in Dubai]," *Official Portal of the Republic of Tartarstan*, accessed October 13, 2022, <https://dubai.tatarstan.ru/eng/>.

(66) Minullina, interviewed by Diana Galeeva, 2020.

(67) Minullina, interviewed by Diana Galeeva, 2020.

(68) "Tatarstan President: The UAE is One of the Most Attractive Partners for the Development of Economic Contracts," *Official Portal of the Republic of Tartarstan*, February 21, 2021, accessed October 13, 2022, <https://dubai.tatarstan.ru/eng/index.htm/news/1938182.htm>.

(69) Minullina, interviewed by Diana Galeeva, 2020.

the Gulf, have negatively affected dealings between Tatarstan and its GCC partners, Taliya Minullina explained in an interview that the republic explicitly eschews projects involving multiple states.⁽⁷⁰⁾ Instead, Tatarstan engages with the GCC member states bilaterally, which helps it avoid being affected by interstate conflicts. In other words, where the foreign policies of the GCC states clash with one another, Tatarstan follows a pragmatic approach in line with the Russian Federation's foreign policy objectives.

The pragmatism that marks Tatarstan's relationship with the GCC member states can also be observed in its accommodation of differences in their ideological, political, or religious stances. This is exemplified by how religious leaders in Tatarstan and the GCC member states deal with differences between their preferred *madhhabs* (schools of Islamic jurisprudence). The Hanafi school is preferred in Tatarstan, while the Hanbali, Shafi'i, Maliki, and Ibadi schools dominate in the Gulf. In response to the question of how these differences are settled, Tatarstan's mufti, Kamil Samigullin, shared the following during an interview:

As for the various madhhabs, this cannot be overlooked. Since we are Hanafis, we have our own Ulema Council in Tatarstan. It consists of all competent scholars, and all shari'a issues are solved there. But there are two aspects to any question. For example, Turkish Muslims seem to be Hanafis, but our attitude to the Syrian issue will be completely different because we have our own television, we have our own propaganda, we have our own books. These all affect us. Therefore, the political aspect will always be different, which is normal. Given this, we cannot just turn to a foreign specialist and ask them to solve an issue; everything is solved internally, and there are no problems.⁽⁷¹⁾

This shows that even at the level of religious authorities in Russia's Muslim-majority regions, pragmatism pervades, enabling Moscow to pursue its key goals and objectives. This approach does not preclude differences of opinion on issues related to the global Muslim *ummah*. Instead, it again illustrates the role of religious organizations in Muslim-populated areas as a crucial part of the Kremlin's model for using Islam for soft power to achieve its objectives.

(70) Minullina, interviewed by Diana Galeeva, 2020.

(71) Kamil Samigullin, interviewed by Diana Galeeva, 2021.

Moscow’s utilization of Russian Muslims, particularly Tatars, to advance its foreign policies in the Middle East was first attempted successfully nearly a century ago. As briefly noted above, Karim Khakimov, the first Soviet consul-general in Makkah, was a Muslim of Tatar origin.⁽⁷²⁾ His contribution to warm relations, especially in the 1920s and 1930s, is remembered today in Saudi Arabia and Russia, alongside the work of other Muslim Soviet diplomats. The legacy of Karim Khakimov also grants opportunities for the development of relations between Saudi Arabia and Bashkortostan because the Soviet diplomat was born there. For example, the “Khakimov factor” was acknowledged during the plenary of the fifth meeting of the “Russia–Islamic World Group of Strategic Vision,” which took place in Ufa in 2019.⁽⁷³⁾ Aynur Akkulov, vice president of the Union of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of the Republic of Bashkortostan, suggested that “when Saudis visited Ufa, where the [Russia–Islamic World] Group held a meeting in 2019, they said that [they] came to see the homeland of the diplomat who [tightened relations between] the USSR and the Kingdom, and who was a close friend of Ibn Saud.”⁽⁷⁴⁾

For his part, the journalist and director for the Middle East and North Africa at the Moscow Policy Group, Yury Barmin, elaborates on this point and the implications of the tragic fate of the Soviet diplomat for the very future of the Middle East:

Soviet–Saudi relations turned sour after Khakimov was executed in Moscow, which happened two months before the discovery of the largest deposit of oil in the world in March 1938 in Saudi Arabia. Arguably, had the Soviets not killed their sole link to the Saudi King and, by extension, to his immense oil wealth, the Middle East might well look very different today.⁽⁷⁵⁾

Interestingly, this view was reflected in Akkulov’s argument during an interview conducted with the author in 2020: “who knows how history would have changed if [Khakimov] had not been killed. Maybe today we would have very close relations.”⁽⁷⁶⁾

(72) Naumkin, *Nesostoyavsheesya partnerstvo*.

(73) Timur Rakhmatullin, “Shaimiev Said that Millions of Muslims in Russia Need Contacts With the Islamic World,” *Realnoe Vremya*, December 2, 2019, <https://realnoevremya.com/articles/4018-ufa-hosts-russia-islamic-world-strategic-vision-groups-meeting>.

(74) Aynur Akkulov, interviewed by Diana Galeeva, 2020.

(75) Yury Barmin, “Russian Energy Policy in the Middle East,” *Insight Turkey*, 19:4, 2017, 125–126.

(76) Akkulov, interviewed by Diana Galeeva, 2020.

Similar developments have played out in Bashkortostan. Ruslan Mirsayapov — who, at the time I met him for an interview, was the chairman of the State Committee of Bashkiria for Foreign Economic Relations — is currently the trade representative of the Russian Federation in Azerbaijan. During the interview, he stated that Bashkortostan had been invited to pitch the possibility of economic collaboration with the GCC states at the OIC headquarters; the invitation arose from the “Khakimov factor.”⁽⁷⁷⁾ Akkulov and Mirsayapov both stressed the ongoing interest in economic projects with the GCC member states in tourism and oil production, among other areas.⁽⁷⁸⁾ However, further relations between Bashkortostan and the GCC have not yet gone beyond the arrangements other Muslim regions have established with Saudi Arabia, including coordinating the hajj and cooperation in specific religious and educational arenas. Not unlike Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, as Mirsayapov notes, has attempted to develop ties with all states equally and without taking sides during the Gulf diplomatic crisis of 2017.⁽⁷⁹⁾ This adds to the Kremlin’s implementation of soft power by integrating Muslim regions into its own objectives.

Notwithstanding the UAE’s investments in Chechnya, GCC member states have undertaken limited foreign direct investment (FDI) in Russia’s Muslim regions. In 2017, the UAE’s share was 0.8 percent of the total FDI in Tatarstan; in 2018, this rose to 8.4 percent and then fell back to 0.8 percent in 2019.⁽⁸⁰⁾ In 2019 the UAE sunk US\$2.7 million into Tatarstan by purchasing TGT PRIME LLC (a former Tatarstan company that moved its head office to Dubai).⁽⁸¹⁾ Bahrain also expressed some interest in investing in Tatarstan, especially in its oil refining sector.⁽⁸²⁾ The Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF) signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with Bahrain’s sovereign wealth fund, Mumtalakat, in 2014.⁽⁸³⁾ By 2018, Mumtalakat had invested more than US\$235 million in the RDIF.⁽⁸⁴⁾

(77) Ruslan Mirsayapov, interviewed by Diana Galeeva, 2020.

(78) Akkulov, interviewed by Diana Galeeva, 2020; Mirsayapov, interviewed by Diana Galeeva, 2020.

(79) Mirsayapov, interviewed by Diana Galeeva, 2020.

(80) This information was provided to the author per an official request to the Tatarstan Investment Development Agency (TIDA).

(81) Minullina, interviewed by Diana Galeeva, 2020.

(82) “Rustam Minnikhanov Takes Part in an Opening Ceremony of Tatarstan Oil, Gas and Petrochemistry Forum,” *Official Portal of the Republic of Tartarstan*, August 31, 2022, accessed October 13, 2022, <https://tatarstan.ru/eng/index.htm/news/2117806.htm>.

(83) Robert Mogeilnicki, “Oil Price War Tests Saudi–Russian Investment Cooperation,” *Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington (AGSIW)*, April 3, 2020, <https://agsiw.org/oil-price-war-tests-saudi-russian-investment-cooperation/>.

(84) Minullina, interviewed by Diana Galeeva, 2020.

Overall, the GCC member states have not invested directly in the Russian Muslim regions but have opted to invest through the RDIF (which might suggest limitations to the factor of shared Muslim identity). Taliya Minullina explains the reason —namely, the scant global experience of investing in projects in the Russian Federation (and the lack of successful prior projects to reassure investors), as well as the high expectation of state guarantees — 100 percent return on investment — that most of the GCC member states have when investing through the RDIF.⁽⁸⁵⁾ Moreover, despite the arrangements mentioned between Saudi Arabia and Bashkortostan, there is considerable competition worldwide for investments from Saudi Arabia (and the other Gulf states), as noted by Ruslan Mirsayapov.⁽⁸⁶⁾ The relevance of Islamic banking and finance in Russia has increased under Western sanctions, and cooperation between Russia and the GCC member states has been moving in this direction, either through para-diplomatic efforts or platforms like the Kazan Summit.⁽⁸⁷⁾ However, this cooperation has so far brought limited results, perhaps due to ongoing challenges such as the lack of legislative, regulatory, and organizational frameworks and tax barriers.⁽⁸⁸⁾

2.2. *Non-governmental Pathways of Engagement*

In addition to the traditional two major Russian Muslim-populated areas, other “hybrid” subregions have been established through active internal and external migration processes.⁽⁸⁹⁾ Laruelle stresses that Islam has spread beyond these two main major centers and, as a result, has become a pan-Russian phenomenon⁽⁹⁰⁾ that has also been utilized in the broader Kremlin policy of soft power. Indeed, Islam is now salient in Central Russia (e.g., Muslim communities in Moscow, St. Petersburg, Nizhny Novgorod, Ryazan, Yaroslavl), in the polar regions (e.g., Muslim communities in Murmansk, Arkhangelsk, Severodvinsk, Salekhard, Norilsk, Dudinka, Yakutsk, Vorkuta, and Vovyi Urengoy), Southern Russia (e.g., Astrakhan, Volgograd, the Republic of Kalmykia, Krasnodar, and Rostov) and Siberia.⁽⁹¹⁾ Moscow has strategically utilized

(85) Minullina, interviewed by Diana Galeeva, 2020.

(86) Mirsayapov, interviewed by Diana Galeeva, 2020.

(87) L. S. Mokina, “Otsenka razvitiya islamskogo bankinga kak alternativnogo instrumenta finansirovaniya i vozmozhnosti ego primeneniya v usloviyakh Rossii [Assessment of Development of Islamic Banking as Alternative Instrument of Financing and Possibility of its Application in Russia],” *Russian Journal of Entrepreneurship*, 18:16, 2017, 2399–2412, doi: 10.18334/rp.18.16.38232.

(88) Mokina, “Ostenka razvitiya.”

(89) Marya S. Rozanova and Akhmet A. Yarlykapov, “The Islamic Religion and Cultural Diversity in Contemporary Russia: Case Study of North Caucasus Region, Dagestan,” *OMNES: The Journal of Multicultural Society*, 5:1, 2014, 23.

(90) Laruelle, “Russia’s Islam.”

(91) Marlène Laruelle, “Polar Islam: Muslim Communities in Russia’s Arctic Cities,” *Problems of Post-Communism*, 67:4–5, 2020, 327–37.

Muslims in these areas through NGOs, religious organizations, and business associations. Such non-governmental actors are a vital element in the Kremlin’s policies to cultivate relations with the GCC states.



Attendees at the Russia and the Islamic World Group of Strategic Vision meeting held in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia⁽⁹²⁾

2.2.1. Non-governmental Organizations

Non-governmental organizations, such as the “Russia–Islamic World Group of Strategic Vision,” play an important soft power role in Russia’s engagement with the GCC member states. The latter outfit was created as a public diplomacy organ for multilateral talks by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2006 after the Russian Federation joined the OIC as an observer in 2005. On the Russian side, the platform includes the governments of eight Muslim-majority federal subjects of the Russian Federation, including Bashkortostan, Dagestan, Chechnya, Kabardino-Balkaria, North Ossetia-Alania, Ingushetia, and Tatarstan, whose head also serves as the chairman of the “Russia–Islamic World Group of Strategic Vision” (see 2.1.2.).⁽⁹³⁾ Other members include Russia’s representative to the OIC, as well as officials of Muslim background from the Russian Presidential Administration, the Federation Council, and the State Duma. The non-Russian elements in the platform consist of 33 statesmen and high-ranking public figures from 27 Muslim states, most

(92) “ICESCO Participates in Meeting of Strategic Vision Group “Russia and the Islamic World,” *ICESCO*, November 25, 2021, <https://www.icesco.org/en/2021/11/25/icesco-participates-in-meeting-of-strategic-vision-group-russia-and-the-islamic-world/>

(93) Ilmira Gafiyatullina, “Mukhametshin: “Tatarstan is the Leader in Cooperation With the OIC,” *Russia–Islamic World*, September 9, 2020, <https://russia-islworld.ru/en/temy/ekonomika/mukhametshin-tatarstan-is-the-leader-in-cooperation-with-the-oic/>.

notably Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia. Since its establishment, the “Russia–Islamic World Group of Strategic Vision” has emerged as an effective mechanism for dialogue between Russia and the GCC member states, with periodic meetings held in several Russian cities (Moscow, Kazan, Ufa, Grozny, Makhachkala), as well as in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.

2.2.2. Islamic Authorities and Organizations

Islamic authorities and organizations also have a soft power role vis-à-vis Russia’s outreach to the Gulf states. In contrast to the Tsarist and Soviet periods, when Muslims were managed by state-controlled “spiritual boards” that were “semi-bureaucratic, monopolistic channel[s] between the state and the Muslims,” the post-Soviet era saw the emergence of a diversified landscape.⁽⁹⁴⁾ In modern Russia, there is no singular Islamic authority on legal or theological issues. As Michael Kemper puts it, there is no “Islamic Patriarch.”⁽⁹⁵⁾

Instead, the administration of Islam is today managed through more than 60 muftiats or “Spiritual Administrations of Muslims” (*Dukhovnoe upravlenie musul’man* or DUM). Even if they only have an influence on the local, regional or republican scale, most of these muftiats retain links with the GCC member states, especially Saudi Arabia, in large part due to their organization of hajj and umrah missions. Among such Islamic organizations is the TsDUM — the successor to the Tsarist and Soviet-era muftiat responsible for Islam in European Russia and Siberia (see 1.2) — which is located in Ufa and headed by Talgat Tadzhuiddin. There is also the Religious Board of Muslims of the Russian Federation (DUMRF), which was established in 1996 in Moscow and is headed by Mufti Shaykh Ravil Gainutdin. Additionally, the Coordination Center for Muslims of the North Caucasus, founded in 1998 on the initiative of Akhmat Kadyrov, is responsible for Muslims of the North Caucasian Federal District, as well as three regions of the Southern Federal District: Adygea, Kalmyk, and Krasnodar Territory. There are a few DUMs at the republic level, including the DUM of the Republic of Tatarstan, headed by Mufti Kamil Samigullin (see 2.1.2).⁽⁹⁶⁾ Through the DUMRF has taken a leading role in fostering dialogue with the Muslim world and the GCC.

(94) Kimitaka Matsuzato and Magomed-Rasul Ibragimov, “Islamic Politics at the Sub-regional Level in Dagestan: Tariqa Brotherhoods, Ethnicities, Localism and the Spiritual Board,” *Europe–Asia Studies*, 57:5, 2015, 754.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09668130500126577>.

(95) Michael Kemper, “Religious Political Technology: Damir Mukhetdinov’s ‘Russian Islam’,” *Religion, State & Society*, 47: 2, 2019, 215,
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09637494.2019.1571331>.

(96) Kemper, “Religious Political Technology.”



Professor Damir Mukhetdinov, first deputy chairman of the DUMRF and director of the Centre for Islamic Studies at St. Petersburg State University, at Bahrain Dialogue Forum.

During an interview with Galeev Ildar, the head of DUMRF’s international department, he highlighted the federal government’s support in facilitating cooperation between the DUMRF and the GCC member states, most notably Saudi Arabia and the UAE.⁽⁹⁷⁾ He elaborated, “thanks to this support from both the government and the administration of the president...[as]....this is quite important for our Arab coreligionists [...] we managed to bring our relationships, our projects to a very high-quality, positive level with positive dynamics.” These views reflect the explicit and implied vital role of DUMRF in combining political, cultural, and religious dimensions in Russia’s outreach to the GCC member states.

Regarding its concrete activities, DUMRF oversees bilateral exchanges and receives guests from abroad, including from GCC member states. Galeev Ildar clarifies that all correspondence and interactions are carried out through official and diplomatic channels.⁽⁹⁸⁾ These exchanges must have a legal basis, typically expressed through various memoranda of relations and cooperation. The latter are concluded at the bilateral level, usually during visits by heads of state to Moscow. For example, in 2017 in Moscow, Mufti Shaykh Ravil Gainutdin and Shaykh

(97) Ildar Galeev, interviewed by Diana Galeeva, 2020.

(98) Galeev, interviewed by Diana Galeeva, 2020.

Abdulrahman bin Muhammad bin Rashid al-Khalifa signed an MoU concerning cooperation between DUMRF and the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs of the Kingdom of Bahrain.⁽⁹⁹⁾ According to the document, the parties agree to work together on areas of mutual interest, including Islamic affairs, heritage preservation, the teaching of the Qur'an, and the management of religious endowments. Another example is an MoU signed between DUMRF and Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Islamic Affairs in 2019.⁽¹⁰⁰⁾ Professor Damir Mukhetdinov, first deputy chairman of the DUMRF and director of the Center for Islamic Studies at St. Petersburg State University, clarifies the significance of this MoU:

This event [signing the MoU] is one of the key events in the program of the official visit of Mufti Shaykh Ravil Gainutdin to Saudi Arabia at the invitation of King Salman bin Abdel Aziz. In general, the visit itself is a kind of continuation of the great success of work carried out by President V. Putin during his state visit to the Kingdom less than a month ago. If, in October 2019, the emphasis was on expanding economic cooperation, then these days, the visit of the Spiritual leader of Russian Islam gives special humanitarian and spiritual content to Russian-Saudi ties.⁽¹⁰¹⁾

Based on the content of such memoranda, it is clear that DUMRF implements different projects with the GCC member states. Among these are the International Qur'an Recitation Competition, which in 2017 was held under the patronage of the King of Bahrain, and in 2018 in memory of Shaykh Zayed al-Nahyan, the founding president of the UAE.⁽¹⁰²⁾ The initiative was suggested by the adviser to Mohammad bin Rashid al-Maktoum, the ruler of Dubai and the vice president and prime minister of the UAE. According to Galeev, the initiative speaks of "our close relationship, our trust, our brotherly attitude to each other, which certainly contributes to the

(99) "Podpisan Memorandum o vzaimoponimani i sotrudnichestve mehdru Sovetom Muftiev Rossii i Vyshim sovetom po Islamskim delam Korolevstva Bahrain [A Memorandum of Understanding and Cooperation was Signed Between the Council of Muftis of Russia and the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs of the Kingdom of Bahrain]," *Russian Muftis Council*, May 13, 2017, accessed October 5, 2022, <https://www.muslim.ru/articles/287/18381/>.

(100) "Novaya vеха v istorii musulman Rossii i Saudovskoy Aravii [A New Milestone in the History of Muslims in Russia and Saudi Arabia]," *Russian Muftis Council*, November 10, 2019, accessed September 30, 2022, <https://muslim.ru/articles/279/25607/>.

(101) "Mufti Gaynutdin i Minister po delam Islama, Nastavleniya i prizyva KSA podpisali... [Mufti Gaynutdin and the Minister of Islamic Affairs, Instruction and Appeal of the KSA signed...]", *Muhtasib of St.Petersburg*, November 10, 2019, accessed 1 October 2022, <http://islamdumpb.ru/blog/muftij-gajnutdin-i-ministr-po-delam-islama-nastavleniya-i-prizyva-ksa-podpisali-memorandum-o-sotrudnichestve>

(102) "CMR i Meždunarodnaja dubajskaja premija Svjašennogo Korana podpisali memorandum o sotrudnichestve [CMR and the Dubai International Holy Quranic Awards Have Signed a Memorandum of Cooperation]," *DUMRF*, March 16, 2018, accessed October 10, 2022, <http://dumrf.ru/common/event/13625>.

successful implementation of such projects.”⁽¹⁰³⁾ Beyond these examples, DUMRF cooperates with several other nations, and meetings with all the GCC member states are conducted equally, following Moscow’s strategy of balancing all sides.⁽¹⁰⁴⁾ Again, this reflects the use of DUMRF as a vital instrument of state’s (religious) soft power tool.

2.2.3. *Business Associations*

Business associations, such as the Association of Muslim Entrepreneurs of the Russian Federation (AME RF), also positively contribute to Russian–GCC relations via soft power projection. As of 2020, the AME RF had 4,672 members and partners from 46 constituent entities of Russia. Members generally hail from small- and medium-sized businesses in Russia operating in the main sectors of the economy: construction, tourism, oil and gas production, manufacturing, communications, retail, and agriculture.⁽¹⁰⁵⁾ During an interview, the organization’s head, Aydar Shagimardanov, explained that “our relations [are] built through religion.”⁽¹⁰⁶⁾ Particular focus is accorded to Saudi Arabia, often concerning the hajj and umrah, as association members are keen to perform their religious duty annually.

That said, there are limited business links with the Saudis, and the association carries out much of its commercial work with the UAE. All activities are below the federal level: “when members of the Association go abroad for meetings, they notify the Russian Embassy and meet with the Russian Ambassador.”⁽¹⁰⁷⁾ A shared Muslim identity plays a positive role in building close ties. For example, Aydar Shagimardanov states that

[I]n the past, the Gulf states seldom thought of Russia in Islamic terms. However, when they learned that there are 20–30 million ethnic Muslims [this changed]. The Gulf states consider even small Muslim groups as ‘little brothers’ whom they would like to help. [...] In other words, they do what they can, willingly, to assist and offer help. Clearly, they do not invest billions, but in any case, there is a tendency to try to normalize good relations; they are very positive.”⁽¹⁰⁸⁾

(103) Galeev, interviewed by Diana Galeeva, 2020.

(104) See the DUMRF website: <http://dumrf.ru/>, accessed October 19, 2022.

(105) “About Us,” *AMERF*, accessed September 29, 2022, <https://apmrf.ru/o-nas/>.

(106) Shagimardanov, interviewed by Diana Galeeva, 2020.

(107) Shagimardanov, interviewed by Diana Galeeva, 2020.

(108) Shagimardanov, interviewed by Diana Galeeva, 2020.

3. Conclusion

This study has examined how Russia's Muslim minority populations have been leveraged in recent decades as part of Moscow's outreach to the GCC member states. Under Putin's leadership, an explicit soft power strategy has incorporated the para-diplomatic efforts of Russia's Muslim-majority republics and regions, international non-governmental organizations (e.g., the "Russia-Islamic World Group of Strategic Vision"), Islamic authorities and organizations, and business associations.

Historically, Russia's Muslims were framed as a security threat, including in Putin's first term. However, Putin's later governments shifted the approach to a new and more pragmatic framework that explicitly utilized soft power. It has enabled the federal center to achieve its primary objectives (security, political and economic) and provide some economic benefits to the Russian Muslim regions. The brief historical account in this study has shown that while Islam has had a millennium-long history in Russia proper, it was only in the 1920s and 1930s that Moscow realized the value of utilizing the Muslim factor in its foreign policy. Under Putin's leadership, this soft policy has been revived, bringing positive dividends for Russia.

Russia's relationship with the West will likely continue to deteriorate, requiring Moscow to seek friends and partners in the Gulf region (and elsewhere). For example, the financial crisis of 2008 saw the idea of Islamic banking promoted in Russia, as local banks faced a liquidity shortage and needed alternative sources of capital.⁽¹⁰⁹⁾ Moreover, after the annexation of Crimea announced in 2014 when Russian banks felt the squeeze of Western sanctions, the idea was floated again by the Association of Russian Banks which proposed a committee be established in Russia's Central Bank to regulate the activities of shari'a-compliant banks.⁽¹¹⁰⁾ In summary, it is safe to assume that Islam will continue to be invoked as part of Russia's soft power strategy toward the GCC into the foreseeable future.

(109) Mokina, "Ostenka razvitiya."

(110) Mokina, "Ostenka razvitiya."

About the Author

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