Between Salafism and Eurasianism: Geidar Dzhemal and the Global Islamic Revolution in Russia

Sibgatullina, G.; Kemper, M.

DOI
10.4324/9781351022422
10.1080/09596410.2017.1287485

Publication date
2018

Document Version
Final published version

Published in
Russia's Islam and Orthodoxy beyond the Institutions

License
Article 25fa Dutch Copyright Act (https://www.openaccess.nl/en/in-the-netherlands/you-share-we-take-care)

Link to publication

Citation for published version (APA):

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

Download date: 24 Nov 2023
Between Salafism and Eurasianism: Geidar Dzhemal and the Global Islamic Revolution in Russia

Gulnaz Sitgatullina and Michael Kemper

ABSTRACT
Geidar Dzhemal was arguably the best-known mouthpiece of radical Islam in the contemporary Russia media world: with his broad erudition in Western philosophy, Abrahamic theology and world history, he easily upstaged most official representatives of Islam in his country. While his Islamic project borrowed heavily from Marxist thinking, Dzhemal's non-conformist teaching and his personal charisma also made him famous among right-wing thinkers, who see him as the 'Godfather' of Russian converts to Islam. However, Dzhemal defied common classifications, both political and religious; his discourse adapted to the changes in Russian politics from Yeltsin to Putin, which allowed him to appeal to a broad range of audiences. This article argues that his popularity can be explained by the fact that, with his promotion of a global anti-Western revolution under the Islamic banner, Dzhemal was still embedded in mainstream discourses on Russia's national interests.

Geidar Dzhemal (1947–2016) was the enfant terrible of Russia's Islamic scene. The Russian public knew him as an eloquent guest of prime-time talk-shows who had the courage to speak up for a radical political vision of Islam. He challenged the Russian political establishment head-on, including the clownesque nationalist Vladimir Zhirinovskii in Russia, the mullahs and muftis, for whom he had nothing but contempt. Against the Islamic tradition - an interpretation with which he nevertheless attempted to strike a chord with Russian patriotic sentiments, in order to forge solidarity with what he understood as the Muslim struggle for justice and higher metaphysical fulfilment. However, Dzhemal defied common classifications, both radical Islam in the contemporary Russia media world: with his broad erudition in Western philosophy, Abrahamic theology and world history, he easily upstaged most official representatives of Islam in his country. While his Islamic project borrowed heavily from Marxist thinking, Dzhemal's non-conformist teaching and his personal charisma also made him famous among right-wing thinkers, who see him as the 'Godfather' of Russian converts to Islam. However, Dzhemal defied common classifications, both political and religious; his discourse adapted to the changes in Russian politics from Yeltsin to Putin, which allowed him to appeal to a broad range of audiences. This article argues that his popularity can be explained by the fact that, with his promotion of a global anti-Western revolution under the Islamic banner, Dzhemal was still embedded in mainstream discourses on Russia's national interests.

Geidar Dzhemal (1947–2016) was the enfant terrible of Russia's Islamic scene. The Russian public knew him as an eloquent guest of prime-time talk-shows who had the courage to speak up for a radical political vision of Islam. He challenged the Russian political establishment head-on, including the clownesque nationalist Vladimir Zhirinovskii (Solovyov 2005). Dzhemal was also famous for mocking the official representatives of Islam in Russia, the mullahs and muftis, for whom he had nothing but contempt. Against the official concept of 'traditional Islam', Dzhemal posited his own radical interpretation of the Islamic tradition – an interpretation with which he nevertheless attempted to strike a chord with Russian patriotic sentiments, in order to forge solidarity with what he understood as the Muslim struggle for justice and higher metaphysical fulfilment. His works on revolutionary Islam were still intrinsically linked to mainstream 'Russian' topics, and to what are perceived as Russia's national interests.

Dzhemal's public image was constantly in flux: in his long career as a public philo-
sopher, he presented himself as an eccentric Moscow Bohemian inspired by Western esoteric literature, as a Russian fascist, as a proponent of Sunni Salafism, as an Islamic theologian in the Shi'i tradition of Iran and as a geopolitical thinker of the Eurasian trend. Yet he was also seen as an Islamic Marxist (Umiland 2014; Laruelle 2016). Dzhemal's journey through...
all of these political and religious programmes, and the mosaic of his ideological and religious constructions, reflected the turbulent period through which Russia has passed, from Perestroika to Putin.

This article analyses the philosophical, Islamic and political trajectory of one who was probably Russia’s best-known public mouthpiece of Islam. After around 1990, when he started publishing on Islam, Dzhemal experimented with many concepts and linked himself to various movements, but the vagueness and the internal contradictions of his visions were not detrimental to his success. Rather, this diversity of orientations allowed him to connect with various trends in Russian society, and to constantly present himself as the most thought-provoking ‘Muslim expert’ on Islam, in a political environment that has been shaped by many breaks and changes. It is the appearance of depth, sincerity and passion that made his such a powerful and compelling voice.

We argue that Dzhemal managed to remain acceptable in the public discourse and escaped prosecution because he was never successful in establishing a broader movement or a group of obedient followers or a religious community that would remain under his wing. In fact, his political projects were very visible but remained marginal. But even this was not detrimental to his popularity – on the contrary: the ‘virtual’ character of his political platforms allowed him to escape classification as a political threat to the system, and to maintain his access to the television screen. As a result, we argue, this radical thinker was part of the system: he remained a thought-provoking insider, an independent philosopher who constantly pushed the boundaries of what can be said, but who played within the limits of the political game in the same way as other, non-Muslim, radical thinkers did.

This study explores the adaptability that Dzhemal demonstrated by linking his career as a political figure with his work as a public intellectual. We draw on Dzhemal’s books and articles and his regular political comments, as well as on his interviews, video lectures and speeches. These will be contextualized by the reactions that Dzhemal provoked from various sides.

**Dzhemal’s colourful trajectory**

On the website of his Islamic Committee of Russia, Geidar Dzhemal described himself as ‘a Russian with Islamic roots’, an example of a Russian of the nearest future: a Russian-speaking Muslim, a patriot of Islamic Russia’ (Islamski Komitet Rossi 2013). Interestingly, when in 2013 Dugin characterized Dzhemal as ‘a brilliant thinker’ (Golovin 2013, 2:50-3:11). In 1988, both held positions in the right-wing movement Pamiaï, but Dzhemal was soon excluded from the movement for the ‘occultism’ that he allegedly practised (Tiazhlov 2016). Dugin for a brief period joined the National Bolshevik Party of Eduard Limonov, and from 2000 developed his own Eurasianist platforms, which made him an influential political philosopher. Inspired by the Eurasianists of the 1920s, Dugin’s Neo-Eurasianism holds that Russia must realize its distinct destiny, emanating from the country’s unique geographical position in Europe and Asia and from its diverse ethnic composition. In the neo-Eurasian model, Russia is called upon to counterbalance the decadent West, the Atlantic world, and particularly the imperialist USA (see Shlapentokh 2007; Laruelle 2008; Shakhovtsov 2009; Umland 2010; Laruelle 2015). This messianic ideology is to a large degree built on appeals to spirituality, which allows it to connect to various religious traditions of the Eurasian ‘heartland’.

From Western esotericism, Dzhemal found his way to Islam. Probably inspired by the Iranian Revolution (1978/1979) and the mujahedin in Afghanistan, Dzhemal joined the Islamist movement in Tajikistan, where an Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan (Hizbi Nahzati Islomii Tojekiston) came into being. In 1990, Dzhemal participated in the Astra-khan convention of Islamic activists that established an umbrella Islamic Revival Party (Islamskiia Partiia Vozezhedeniia). Active in various parts of the USSR, this party emphasized the role of Muslims in geopolitical terms, claiming that only the USSR’s Turks, Caucasians and Islamized Slavs could enable the Soviet Union to stand against the West (Shlapentokh 2008, 35). The party leadership came from various Islamic traditions, and some of its leaders, including the Daghestani (Avar) Akhmad-Kadi Akhtaev, later spearheaded the movement of ’Wahhabi’ dissidents in the North Caucasus (Bobrovnikov 2007, 162).

According to Muhiddin Kabiri (who knew him from 1990 on), Dzhemal’s grand philosophical designs and his excellent Russian made a huge impression on the Tajik activists:
they almost held him in higher esteem than their own leaders. During the Civil War in Tajikistan (1992–1997), Dzhemal reportedly worked as an advisor to Davlat Usmon, one of the founders of the Tajik Islamic Revival Party (Laurinavicius 2015). The Civil War was eventually settled by integrating the Tajik Revival Party into a coalition government, from which it was then, however, gradually removed (Dzhemal 2005, 9). The Russian branch of the Islamic Revival Party was eliminated in 1994, when the conflict in Chechnya turned into a war.

From 1992, Dzhemal frequently visited Iran and forged ties with leaders of the Islamic Republic (including with Khomeini’s son Ahmad), which significantly expanded Dzhemal’s financial muscle. In the aftermath of the dissolution of the USSR, Iran was one of Russia’s few remaining partners in the Middle East, and both Dzhemal and Dugin provided spiritual legitimacy for this strategic partnership. For Dugin, Orthodox Christianity is close to Shia Islam since both have managed to preserve their esoteric nature, while Western Churches and Sunni Islam have degenerated and became ‘purely social’ religions (Dugin 1995, sections 3 and 4). Dzhemal asserted that Russia should even help Iran to acquire a nuclear bomb to counterbalance the state of Israel, which both Dugin and Dzhemal regarded as a Western colonial outpost in the Middle East (Shapentolich 2008, 42; Dzhemal 1999a, 233).

Yet while Dzhemal defended Iran as a positive model, he still differentiated himself: ‘I am not a Râfi’id, meaning he did not accept for himself the label that Sunnis often give to Shiis, namely that they are ‘rejectors’ of the first three caliphs who succeeded the Prophet Muhammad, and only revere the fourth caliph, ‘Ali Ibn Abi Talib (d. 661), as the rightful heir to Muhammad. Going even further, Dzhemal distanced himself from much of the Shi’i theological traditions: ‘I am the enemy of the Sufi and Qom pantheism’ (obviously referring to his andonic theological thinkers such as Mutâsâf and Sadar, d. 1640), ‘but in terms of fiqh [Islamic law] and the evaluation of Islamic history I adhere to the Sunna of the Prophet as transmitted through Hazrat Ali (A.S. [‘alayhi al-salam, ‘peace be upon him’]). In many aspects, this tradition coincides with Salafism’ (Dzhemal 2010c, 243; cf. Laruelle 2016, 91). He thus reduced Shiism to its legal school, which has historically been characterized by a conflict between adherents of taqlîd (conservative emulation) and ijtihäd (the quest for renewal through new readings of the Islamic sources text). Dzhemal strongly sided with the latter, against taqlîd (Dzhemal 2008e). And ijtihäd, usually defined as a qualified scholar’s right to solve legal questions by directly turning to the Qur’an and the Hadith traditions of the Prophet, is indeed also a major element of the Sunni reformist thought that ultimately led to the emergence of various trends of Salafism.

In the early 1990s, Dzhemal became a regular guest on the main Russian state television channels, and even hosted his own talk shows (including Nyme and Sakral’naia geografiia). He also established his own information centre Towhid (‘Monotheism’) and launched an Islamic Russian-language newspaper, called Al-Wa‘dat (‘Unity’). The names of these outlets are key concepts in the Salafi discourse, not only in Russia; by making the unity (and complete oneness) of God one of his central concepts, Dzhemal tried to build bridges between Shiism and Sunnism. As he argued in a 1999 interview, the differences between the ‘inner spirit’ of Islam, as preserved in Shiism, and the ‘outer’, geopolitical and Eurasian dimension, as developed in Sunnism, ‘are already being washed away’ (Dzhemal 1999a, 3–4). In particular, according to Dzhemal, the Shi’ concept that the

Twelfth (Hidden) Imam is still ‘among us’ does not contradict the Sunni concept that the best members of the community should take power; those who come to power will just prepare the ground for the return of the Imam (7–8). The ‘intellectual and determined centre’ of the new Islamic movement has to be as inclusive as possible, in order to keep the Muslim world united.

In 1995, Dzhemal founded what he hoped would be such a centre, the “Islamic Committee of Russia” (Islamskii Komitet Rossi), which was organized that would bring together Muslim thinkers from all over the Russian Federation. Yet far from being an ‘inter-regional public movement’ (as it claimed to be), from the start the Committee became his own media platform.

The uneasy Shi-Salafi background of this enterprise is reflected in the fact that Dzhemal first announced the establishment of his Islamic Committee in 1992 (Mukhamator 2008, 70–71), after participating in a convention of the Popular Arab and Islamic Congress in Khartoum. This organization strove to ‘bring together under a single banner hard-line Islamic militants and nationalists’ (Jaccoud 2002, 31) of various shades and colours. The founder of the Congress, the Sudanese religious leader Hasan al-Turâbi, reportedly endorsed Dzhemal’s initiative, since it promoted Islam as a ‘successor of communism on the territory of the former Soviet empire’ (Kudinova 2010, 98).

The goal of Dzhemal’s Islamic Committee is to ‘formulate an ideology of political Islam of the twenty-first century’, specifically for ‘the Muslim diaspora’. By ‘diaspora’, he meant Muslims in Russia operating outside of their ethnic homelands. For Dzhemal, Muslims in a non-Muslim environment, ‘in a culturally foreign space’ (Kudinova 2010, 156), are at the forefront of Islamic intellectual development. Needless to say, the Muscovite Dzhemal presented himself as the natural front man of this movement.

There are reports that in 1996 Dzhemal became advisor to Aleksander Lebed’, the well-known Russian general who in that year negotiated the Khasaviurt accords with the Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov, and who then ran against Yeltsin in the first round of the 1996 presidential elections. Yeltsin eventually made Lebed’ secretary of Russia’s Security Council, and in this function Lebed employed Dzhemal to draft policy reports on the North Caucasus (Gurianov 2014). If this information is true, it confirms Dzhemal’s links to popular right-wing Russian nationalists, who may have seen him as a broker with access to dubious Chechen leaders whom the Russian organs could not contact directly. In fact, after the start of the war in Chechnya, Dzhemal declared his support for the Arab and Chechen ‘Wahhabis’, and he was personally acquainted with the warlord Shamil Basaev and Chechnya/Ichkeria’s ‘chief ideologist’ Movladi Udugov. Dzhemal saw the war in Chechnya as the beginning of a global civil war between the ‘party of God’ and the ‘party of Satan’, the latter represented by the ‘world government’, multinational corporations, banks and national bureaucracies (Dzhemal 1999c, 45). He claimed that Russia had been drawn into the Chechen war by Western secret services (Dzhemal 2001a, 187). He continued to link up with various patriotic movements and with Islamic platforms outside of Russia’s official Islam, and in 1999 even tried to get a seat in the State Duma (Tiatkov 2016).

Dzhemal’s bellicose discourse, his polemical attacks on Israel and the West, and his criticism of the growing influence of the Russian Orthodox Church (in 2005 Dzhemal called for Christian symbols to be removed from all national emblems, including from the coat of

RUSSIA’S ISLAM AND ORTHODOXY BEYOND THE INSTITUTIONS

RUSSIA’S ISLAM AND ORTHODOXY BEYOND THE INSTITUTIONS

94

95
arms) (Lenta 2005), are indeed in line with the radical Russian nationalist discourse. At the same time, Dzhemal’s political vision of a revolutionary community has anarchist features that appeal to other political dissidents, including Eduard Limonov. The latter confessed that his interest in Islam resulted from a conversation with the ‘Godfather’ of Russian Islam in 1998 (Bekkin 2012, 394).

The 9/11 attacks of 2001 created a new environment for Dzhemal to roll out more conspiracy theories, and to adapt his teaching to the new circumstances. He argued vigorously that the attacks had been carried out not by Muslims but by an unnamed totalitarian sect ‘from a certain country that does not exist anymore’, and that they were orchestrated by the CIA and other government circles in the US (Dzhemal’ 2001a, 111). He claimed that the chaos and fear spread by the attacks had allowed a ‘fascist putch’ in Washington, leading to the obliteration of all civil rights in the West, and to carpet bombing in Afghanistan, and that, under the weight of Russia’s substantial foreign debt, Russia’s new president, Putin, willingly supported the global dictatorship, thereby ‘transferring American policies into the Eurasian space’. According to Dzhemal, Putin’s weak leadership led to a sell-out of Russian sovereignty, for the West wanted to tear Russia to pieces. In this situation, according to Dzhemal, the only real force that could resist the global world order was political Islam: ‘today Islam is ready to cooperate with all anti-globalization forces, which are morally united in their rejection of the oligarchy and of the new, essentially fascist world order that is now imposed on the world after the provocations of 9/11’ (127). By linking up with the world’s protest movements, Islam would be able to leave its ‘confessional ghetto’ and become the vanguard for the common people; if Russia joined forces with Islam and with the European Left, it would win the upcoming Third World War (Dzhemal’ 2003b, 313). In another piece, he described this new alliance as an international Left movement, and called for the establishment of an International Sharia Court, as an alternative to the International Court of Justice in The Hague, with the task of prosecuting US war crimes in Afghanistan (Dzhemal’ 2002, 137). Needless to say, nothing came of this. Later Dzhemal lobbied for released Guantanamo prisoners of Russian citizenship, and one of them joined the Islamic Committee (Mukhamiatov 2008, 71).

However, starting in 2002, Dzhemal changed his tone towards Putin, obviously realizing that the latter could no longer be accused of being simply a puppet of the West. Dzhemal now called upon Russia to reconsolidate the post-Soviet area, and ‘if Russia becomes a geopolitical ally of the Islamic world against the American dictate, then the task of a Muslim living in Russia will be to strengthen the opportunities of this geopolitical formation’. He also discouraged Volga Tatars from using Islam as a means to solidify their ethnic identity (Dzhemal’ 2003a, 199-201) – a position that implicitly legitimized the Kremlin’s dismantling of Tatarstan’s autonomy during that period.

Geidar Dzhemal’s Islamic project

According to Laruelle (2016, 89), ‘Dzhemal advances a paradoxical blend of geopolitics that combines pro-Islamic, pro-Russian, and pro-Fascist traits into an eclectic “postmodern” blend that is typical in the era of digital geopolitics’. Seen from the perspective of Russian radicalism and fascism studies, Dzhemal appeared to be using Islamic concepts as just another political tool (86). But while there is no doubt that Dzhemal employed Islam for self-promotion, the popularity that his statements still enjoy among Muslim intellectuals requires a closer look at how he used elements of the Islamic tradition for his political constructs. Such an analysis will accentuate less the fascist roots in Dzhemal’s thinking, and emphasize more the leftist elements in his Islamic thought.

Dzhemal makes a geopolitical distinction between dâr al-Isâm (the ‘House of Islam’, in his eyes achieved only in Iran), dâr al-kufî (the ‘House of Unbelief’, which he applies to countries like the United States, Great Britain and France, obviously because these states pursue a war against Islam), and an intermediate category, dâr al-harb (the ‘House of War’). The last comprises most countries of the Muslim world, since their governments are ‘in the hands of infidels’. Interestingly, Dzhemal locates Russia not in dâr al-kufî but, like most of the Middle East, in dâr al-harb, arguing that Muslims have been living there for centuries, and that Russia’s Muslims have the possibility to formulate their own goals, and to influence the domestic and foreign policies of Russia (Dzhemal’ 1997a, 93-94). This is his playing field.

In 2003, Dzhemal published his first book (‘The Revolution of the Prophets’), a collection of his philosophical and political lectures on Western philosophy and traditionalism, the Bible and the Qur’an, and radical geopolitical thinking (Dzhemal’ 2003a). A year later, he published ‘The Liberation of Islam’, a collection of his previous interviews and journalistic pieces (Dzhemal’ 2004a). Three more books appeared in 2010 (Dzhemal’ 2010a; 2010b; 2010c), which can be downloaded for free.

While the changes in Dzhemal’s politico-philosophical writings are astounding and confusing, he had already formulated central elements of his personal discourse in short essays in 1990: the spiritual bankruptcy of Enlightenment thought and multi-culturalism in Russia and the West; the global financial sector’s dominance in the world; Russia’s need to stand up against the US; and the emphasis on radical Islamic political theology as Russia’s ‘natural ally against the West. For Dzhemal, humanity is ‘in a mortal crisis’, and only Islam can defeat this global Daajîl (Antichrist) in the upcoming final battle. This scenario has clear eschatological features: we are living immediately before the End of Time. The fact that Russia is a colonial state that repressed Islam, was already a servant of the Daajîl, but Khomeini in Iran, as well as the mujahidin in Afghanistan, demonstrated the weakness of the superpowers.

At the same time, Dzhemal remained deliberately vague as to what kind of Islam would be victorious. When talking about the core of Islam, he constantly referred to Abraham, as the first prophet, and de-emphasized Muhammad, whose achievement was the return to the core of the Abrahamic tradition and the completion of the prophetic cycle. That is, the Islamic revolution is presented as a project that brings us back to the origins of all three monotheistic religions; and ‘the prophets were revolutionaries in the first place’ (Dzhemal’ 1999a, 19).

His writings after 1990 contain the discursive devices that Dzhemal has continued to employ ever since, namely broad generalizations and provocative assumptions about the current state of humanity. His political analysis of current affairs includes surprising comparisons to ancient Greece, Rome, India, China and the Muslim world, and references to the Bible and the Qur’an. Equally characteristic since that time has been his preference for spoken lectures and the question-and-answer format, to elucidate his ideas in a lively manner that appeals to an educated Russian audience (see Shevchenko 2016). Later he established a strong Internet presence, with blogs and regular political essays.
Dzhemal emphasized his complete independence from any other living Islamic thinker (see Dzhemal’ 2005, 7); the only positive references that he made were to Ayatollah Khomeini and the well-known Iranian left-wing Islamic sociologist ‘Ali Shari’ati (1933–1977). But Dzhemal was quick to reject the system of mujtahids that came to power after the Islamic Revolution; for him, the Iranian clergy are just another religious caste created by the state (Dzhemal’ 2011a).

As the West has declared a ‘total war’ on Muslims, by means of violence, economic blackmail and informational terror (Dzhemal’ 2005, 8), the Muslim community has now taken over the role of the proletariat – a thesis that takes its inspiration from Khomeini’s rhetorical struggle for the ‘downtrodden’ (Persian: mustafaddin, in Dzhemal’s Russian: obedzolennye), and ultimately from Shari’ati. Muslims must transform their religious subjecthood into political will (9). This should be accomplished under the auspices of a platform organization, an Islaminter (11), which would unite all revolutionary Islamic movements. While twentieth-century Marxism had the Socialist International, political theology so far lacks such a centre that can communicate, in a new language, with ‘Providence, history, humanity, and the tsaar’ (Dzhemal’ 2003f, 329–330). Islamintern should declare ‘total jihad’ against the world system of tyranny and injustice; and Russia should understand that Islam is her most valuable partner in this struggle. The Islamic doctrine for uniting the Islamic world might come from Russia’s umma, as Dzhemal already envisaged in 1999 (Dzhemal’ 1999b, 232–233).

His own task in this process Dzhemal saw in ‘revolutionizing the understanding of perception, gnosis, and discursive technologies’, in order ‘to create a methodology of thought as an effective instrument of freedom’. The ultimate goal is to ensure the advent of the Mahdi, the expected redeemer of Islam who will rule before Judgment Day and lead the chosen faithful into the ‘upcoming final war’ (Dzhemal’ 2003f, 329–300). The figure of the Mahdi is very prominent in Shi eschatology, but the redeemer also figures in Sunni traditions, and many jihad movements in history (including in the North Caucasus; see Kemper 2005, 174–184) had such eschatological components. While in his early texts the advent of the Mahdi, with the Black Flag of Abu Muslim from Khorasan, was still central (Dzhemal’ 1990, 84), in later writings the Mahdi topic receded into the background, and with it Dzhemal’s Shiism – obviously in order to be more inclusive.

Dzhemal argued that, in the history of humanity, every revolution was linked to ‘a true religion’ (izannah religia), which is the ‘religion of the prophets’ (religia prorokov). The prophets of the Abrahamic religions were revolutionaries by definition, since they always began their divine ministry with a radical critique of the existing tradition. A revolution is an activity of the ‘Holy Spirit’, a religious mystery, and it is impossible beyond the religious context of Abrahatism, since Abraham was the first to fight against tyranny (Dzhemal’ 2001b, 38–39).

The opposite of this revolutionary-prophetic commonplace is ‘popovshchina’, the rule of professional clerics who furiously defend the established tradition and the status-quo. The ‘clerical apparatus’ that emerged in Russia, the mutifs of the state-approved ‘Muslim Spiritual Administrations’, are just state-appointed officials, and have no legitimacy (Dzhemal’ 1999a, 5, 9). Similarly, Sufism is just another attempt to establish a clerical caste by smuggling pre-Islamic elements into Islam (30). Yet Dzhemal also rejected religious caste by smuggling pre-Islamic elements into Islam (30). Yet Dzhemal also rejected
among self-governing communities. These communities recognize the freedom of each of their members and build relationships with other communities on principles of a treaty. A Muslim community should therefore establish a shari'a (council), a term borrowed from both the Soviet and the Islamic political lexicons. According to Dzhemal, the shari'a would give power to the people, who could then unite all Muslims and implement the activities of the ‘Party of God’ in Russia (Dzhemal' 1999a, 4, 19, 21, 33–34). How the leaders should be identified, however, is left open: Dzhemal rejected the Sunni concept of elected leadership (Dzhemal’ 1999a, 8), which implies that leaders should emerge through their own sense of vocation.

Eurasia, diaspora, and Russian Muslims

While Dzhemal presented Islam primarily as a supra-national, internationalist project, his 1990 writings already contained racist attitudes. In particular, he attributed the decline of the Islamic world in the post-Mongol period to the growing dominance of the ‘Turkish element’, which led to ‘organizational stagnation’, to a defensive attitude towards the West, and thus to a loss of Islamic vigour. He argued that the Turkic nationalism that succeeded the Ottoman ideology was in fact formulated by Anatolian Jews, and that Arab nationalism was the work of Armenians (Dzhemal’ 1990, 80–81). For Dzhemal, the ideas of nationalism and patriotism are harmful myths to enslave the people. Equally harmful, in his opinion, are concepts such as ‘Bashkir Islam’ and ‘Tatar Islam’, for these would only split the Muslim community (Sozaev-Gur’ev 2010).

At the same time, Dzhemal is struggling to distinguish his vision from that of Aleksandr Dugin. Without mentioning the latter’s name, in 2001 Dzhemal mocked the growing popularity of Eurasian geopolitics, which he called a parody of the Mongol and Turkic traditions. Geopolitics in the Mongol tradition (which, in his view, culminated in the gigantic Soviet bureaucracy) are an uninspired and ‘anti-passionate’ conception (a-passionarnaia kontseptsiia) – a false science (izhenauka) that relies on the ‘cult of soil’, ‘as a basis for constructing a neo-pagan mentality for the middle and lower classes, so that these become immune against influences of social destabilization’. In other words, Dugin’s neo-Eurasian ideology is rejected as a conservative cover-up to discourage radical political activism in Putin’s Russia (Dzhemal’ 2001c, 222–223).

But Dzhemal offered another, allegedly more sublime and revolutionary Eurasian model – one that is not a Mongol tradition but Indo-European in nature. This he identified with the project of Alexander the Great: by uniting the space that is today the core of the Muslim World – from Xinjiang to Libya – Alexander laid the basis for Hellenism, and his development of an alternative model based on Alexander the Great, fascinated Sidorov and other ethnic Russian Muslims from a right-wing background; they began to revere Dhû al-Qarnayn as the prophet of all Indo-European tribes, including Russians. In early autumn 2003, Dzhemal also gained a small circle of devoted followers consisting of ethnic Russians with no previous attachment to Islam. Dzhemal gave them individual research projects, the results of which he edited in 2005: Anastasia Ezhova produced studies on ‘Ali Sharif’at and on the Egyptian Muslim Brother Sayyid Qutb, Anton Shmakov worked on the Pakistani-British Islamic thinker Kalim Siddiqi, and others researched the Nation of Islam in the US and Catholic Liberation Theology in Latin America.

Some of his disciples eventually converted to Islam, including Anastasia (Fatima) Ezhova, who became a powerful defender of the Iranian Shi’i model and of Russian Islamic feminism (Kemper 2012). Similarly, the young Russian nationalist Vadim Sidorov (Harun ar-Rusi) joined Dzhemal’s circle in 2003 (Sidorov 2012), and converted not to ‘contemplative Sufism’, as he put it, but to the ‘radical, dzhemalist’ version of Islam (Sidorov 2015a). In particular, Dzhemal’s 2001 critique of Dugin’s neo-Eurasianism, and his development of an alternative model based on Alexander the Great, fascinated Sidorov and other ethnic Russian Muslims from a right-wing background; they began to revere Dhû al-Qarnayn as the prophet of all Indo-European tribes, including Russians. In early autumn 2003, Sidorov and nine others announced the creation of a new Russian Muslim Jamaat ‘Banu Zulkarnain’ (meaning ‘Children of Alexander the Great’). This group saw itself as a Russian ‘bastion’ of the Aryan race, which would ‘fulfil the mission of Dhû al-Qarnayn, who had erected the Iron Gates [usually associated with the Derbend Wall] to deter the infernal hordes of Gogs and Magogs’. In June 2004, the ‘Banu Zulkarnain’ and several other groups of russkie Muslims from Moscow, the
Volga region, Siberia and Kazakhstan united in the National Organization of Russian Muslims (Natsional'naia Organizatsiia Russkikh Muslim'ov; NORM), as an organization of ethnic Russian converts who present themselves as the intellectual vanguard of Islam in Russia. Conversion to Islam was promoted as the solution to Russia's crisis (Mirofudanov 2004).

However, Dzemal preferred to keep his distance from NORM, 'a trueborn, but not planned, and in general unwanted child', as Ezhova called it (Ezhova 2011; see also Sozaev-Gurt'ev 2010). Likewise, Sidorov began to accuse Dzemal of preaching 'heretical Shiism' and 'Caucasian racism', and of contradicting Islam 'in any version of its classical schools' (Sidorov 2015b, 3). Eventually, Sidorov sought integration into another Islamic diaspora, the international Murabitun movement established by Scotsman Ian Duilles. With its home base in Cape Town, the Murabitun adhere to the Malikî madhhab (school of Islamic law), coupled with Shadhiliyya Sufism, both of North African origin. Eventually, in 2007 NORM officially adopted the Malikî madhhab (which has barely any other followers in Russia), with the result that many members left the association.

To conclude, Dzemal succeeded in raising a number of Russian political Islamists, but he clearly failed to keep them under his wing: they went in various directions, to the left (Ezhova) or right (Sidorov) of the political spectrum. But they remained true to Dzemal's diaspora project in so far as they refused to link up with the Sunni Islam of Russia's autochthonous Muslims, and thus remained marginal themselves.

In Putin's new Russia: back to the Caucasus

Particularly since around 2008, Dzemal's writings have centred on the Caucasus. In his essay collection Fuzei i Karamal'otuki (Dzemal' 2010a), he dealt with contemporary political developments especially in Ingushetia, Chechnya and Dagestan. Dzemal had always perceived the region as a last bulwark of passionate Muslims, and his essays often took the form of obituaries dedicated to Islamic activists, including the Ingush human rights activist Magomed Elerov (Dzemal' 2008b) and the Dagestani Islamist and gangster Nadirshakh Khachilaev (Dzemal' 2003e). Equally prominent are essays, often sarcastic in tone, on corruption, violence and events that display the helplessness of the regional and central authorities. The title of the book, Fuzei i Karamal'otuki, refers to two types of flint guns used in the Caucasus, and the book itself is thought of as 'an exchange of gunfire between infantry units prior to a big battle' (Dzemal' 2010b, 2).

But 2010 also saw the publication of another collection, entitled Stena Zulkarnaina, 'The Wall of Dhû l-Qarnayn' (Dzemal' 2010c). In this volume, the articles are designed as instructions for the 'warriors' in that upcoming final war. This also entails a change in linguistic strategy: for the first time, his Russian text contains Arabic religious terminology and mainstream Islamic expressions such as the barmara and eulogies of the Prophet, which Dzemal had not given much attention in earlier writings. Several articles have the Q&A format, and deal with theological and legal issues in Islam, such as the difference between Salafism and Sufism, the defence of belief against infidels, the image of Paradise in Islam (38–66, 211–244). Dzemal thus outlined what he saw as the path of a genuine believer, up to the issue of martyrdom. Largely avoiding any reference to Western thinkers, his argumentation was built on the Qur'an and on the lives of Islamic activists who achieved martyrdom (such as the Shia theologian Muhammad Bâqir al-Šadr, executed in 1980 in Saddam Hussein's Iraq) (254–258, 257, 272–273).

The Caucasus is the battlefield between Islam and the forces of Iblis (Dzemal' 2008c, 268), and torn apart by Russia's imperial ambitions and the 'world liberal club', the latter being accountable for the 2008 war in Georgia (Dzemal' 2008d, 15). Dzemal asserts that the existing republican units in the North Caucasus are just illegitimate 'administrative pieces', created to manipulate Russia's minorities; the region is capable of resistance only if it comes together in a supra-ethnic union (Dzemal' 2008a, 23). And the Caucasus has already brought forward a whole plethora of 'passionate Muslims' (Dzemal' 2004b, 28; 2010c, 77). He clearly sympathized with the 'Caucasus Emirate' that had been proclaimed in 2007, and that continued to organize terrorist attacks against the authorities and Islamic leaders in the North Caucasus and beyond.

Dzemal now treated the Caucasus as an entity separate from the rest of Russia, and seems to have given up on Russia's salutary and revolutionary mission in world history. After the collapse of the USSR, Russia became an imperialist state, albeit 'of the third order', playing the role of 'a junior partner' in the Pax Americana (Dzemal' 2015b). And ultimately, the US would be Russia's 'destroyer' (pogubitel') (Dzemal' 2004b, 8).

It is in this light that Dzemal saw Putin's military intervention in Syria in September 2015 – as a confirmation of Russia's submissiveness to the US: Russia is not combating the 'Islamic State', as it claims, but is defending the regime of the 'sectarian' [Alawite] Bashar al-Assad (Dzemal' 2015a, 03:20–03:21, and 6:01–6:07), who by thousands of strands is linked to the West (02:39–02:42). The US has sanctioned Russia's operation in order to isolate Turkey, which is the only powerful player in the region demanding Assad's resignation. For Dzemal, Russia's air strikes and missile attacks close to the Turkish-Syrian border were meant to deter Turkey from closing the Bosporus to Russia's navy, and thus from access to the Tartus base (Bochkarev 2015).

The Russian mainstream media image of Russia 'rising' back to power and glory, rampant especially since the annexation of the Crimea in March 2014, was in Dzemal's eyes just 'an ice cube in spring' (Dzemal' 2015b); the euphoria will soon be replaced by deep frustration. Dzemal again prophesied the explosion of this discontent in a new religious war. Yet now he had to acknowledge the role of the 'Islamic State': the latter 'makes jihad a political issue, not only a theological phenomenon as it used to be' (Kochetkova 2014). It seems that this acknowledgement must be seen against the background of the exodus of many North Caucasus warriors to join ISIS in Iraq and Syria, which they find more attractive than the declining 'Caucasus Emirate' (see Youngman 2016).

Conclusion: the discourse of radical ambiguities

Dzemal's militant rhetoric placed him right in the middle of the religious confrontation that has been blazoning in Russian society since the early 2000s; he openly declared his opposition to the current regime, participated in the annual Dissenters' Marches (Marsh novykh glasykh), praised Muslim combatants, and called for revolution.

Dzemal's role was somehow similar to that of the controversial but very influential journalist Maksim Shvechenko, who also professes a strong sympathy for the Caucasus, and for 'non-traditional' Islam up to Hamas and Hizbollah. Shvechenko leaves open the question of whether he considers himself a Muslim but is widely seen as a defender...
of Muslim interests. And when in 2012 the authorities came to Dzhemal’s apartment to search for ‘extremist literature’, Dzhemal did not give them entry until his friend Shevchenko arrived on the scene, to give him protection from possible abuse. While searches of this kind usually bring up at least something, in this case nothing illicit was found (Ansar 2012). The incident sparked an open letter of support for Dzhemal; among its 464 signatories, we find not only well-known journalists like Shevchenko and Aleksandr Prokhanov (of the radical left-wing newspaper Zavtra), and controversial Islamic intellectuals (such as Aslambek Ezhaev and Fauzia Bairamova, leader of the self-proclaimed Tatar National Assembly), but almost people who identified themselves as engineers, lawyers, entrepreneurs, doctors, artists, bloggers, teachers and students – which gives an indication of the intellectual audience that Dzhemal reached. Only one person signed as a professional imam (Kavkaz-uzel 2012).

So, who was Geidar Dzhemal? The usual dichotomies of ‘right-wing’ versus ‘leftist’, ‘Western’ versus ‘Islamic’, ‘Russian’ versus ‘Caucasian’, do not work in cases like his and also, in addition his Islamic agenda, there is a mixture of many elements, from Shia discourse to Salafism, with a strong dose of Marxism and Eurasianism. His ‘projects’, including the Islamic Committee of Russia, had as their major function to attract attention, to provoke and to allow alternative thinking in a whole variety of directions. His crude anti-Westernism he shared with Dugin, from whom, however, he distanced himself by focusing on Islam and on the Caucasus. Yet his view of Islam was completely self-made, and he cannot be classified as either a Salafi or a Shii (the more so since he himself by focusing on Islam and on the Caucasus. Yet his view of Islam was completely self-made, and he cannot be classified as either a Salafi or a Shii (the more so since he

While Dzhemal’s structure of conspiracy theories was highly opportunistic and therefore ambiguous, he remained true to his image as an anti-systemic thinker within Russia’s accepted intellectual elite. His major resource was his sharp intellect, his broad philosophical and historical erudition, and, as not only his disciples argue, his personal charisma; the last seems to counterbalance the many inconsistencies within his geopolitical casting of the world.

Geidar Dzhemal passed away on 5 December 2016 in Almaty (Kazakhstan), where he was being treated for cancer. According to his disciples and admirers, he wished to be buried in the historical homeland of the Turks, with a view on the Alatau mountains. This ‘Pan-Turkic’ good-bye was the last ambiguous testimony of the alleged ‘Aryanist’.

Notes

1. For the concept of ‘traditional Islam’ in Russia, see Kristina Kovalskaya’s contribution to this special issue of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations.

2. ‘Dis horai Haydar Jamal va ta’li tars u dar bedori markomi Osyvi marka’i. Personal message from Muhiddin Kabiri to Dr Sophie Roche (Heidelberg), on behalf of the authors. 4 December 2016.

3. A view that Dzhemal paradoxically shared with the Orthodox missionary Daniil Sysoev; on Sysoev, see Gulnaz Sibgatullina’s article in the present issue.

References


104

4. As Danis Garaev shows in the present issue of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations, the passionarity concept was also central in Buriatski’s own messages; the latter might have retrieved it via Dzhemal’s writings.

5. "Dai borai Haydar Jamal va ta’li tars u dar bedori markomi Osyvi marka’i.’ Personal message from Muhiddin Kabiri to Dr Sophie Roche (Heidelberg), on behalf of the authors. 4 December 2016.

Acknowledgments

We express our sincere thanks to Dr Sophie Roche (Heidelberg) for transmitting our questions to Muhiddin Kabiri, who kindly gave us permission to use his statements (which we obtained one day before Dzhemal passed away). We also thank Marlène Larulde (Washington) for an exchange of views on Dzhemal at the October 2016 conference ‘The Image of Islam in Russia’ (Uppsala University), where we learned that she has also produced a study on Dzhemal (Larulde 2016), albeit from a different perspective. Prof. Istvan Fodor, former director of the National Museum in Budapest, kindly shared with us his memories of his time at Moscow State University, where he met his fellow student Vladimir Zhitonkov (conversation with Kemper, Kazan/Sarabakh, 30 May 2014).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.