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

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

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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 the 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 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' Islamic Authority and the Global Islamic Revolution in Russia.

...
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 i d. i. (Mukhambetov 2008). As 'a Muscovite of Azeri origin' Dzhemal emphasizes his city-citizenship, and thereby a certain Muscovite aristocratic attitude. And indeed, Dzhemal's father (a famous Azerbaijani artist, Dzhakhid Dzhemal) is believed to have a genealogy going back to Hulagu Khan, a grandson of Genghis Khan, while his mother was the ethnic Russian Irina Shapovalova (a well-known equestrienne and horse trainer) descended from the Russian noble family of the Shepelevs (Lesko 2009; Pozner 2013). As his parents divorced, Geidar Dzhemal grew up with his maternal grandparents, who moved in Soviet political elite circles. Dzhemal's grandfather, Igor Shapovalov, was a professor of German classical philosophy and a director of the Malyi Theatre; he also served as First Deputy Minister of Culture of the Soviet Union. Igor Shapovalov exerted a lasting influence on the formation of his grandson's philosophical ideas. In 1965, he smoothed Geidar's path into Moscow State University's Institute of Oriental Languages. There,
they almost held him in higher esteem than their own leaders.2 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 Khomeni’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 become ‘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 (Shlapentokh 2008, 42; Dzhemal 1999a, 235).

Yet while Dzhemal defended Iran as a positive model, he still differentiated himself: ‘I am not a ṭālīfī, meaning he did not accept for himself the label that Sunnis often give to Shiis, namely that they are ‘rejecters’ of the first three caliphs who succeeded the Prophet Muhammad, and only revere the fourth caliph, ‘Ali b. Abī Talib (d. 661), as the rightful heir to Muhammad. Going even further, Dzhemal distanced himself from much of the Shiitheological traditions: ‘I am the enemy of the Sufis and Qom pantheists’ (obviously referring to Monomistic theological thinkers such as Alī al-Sadār, 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-salām, ‘peace be upon him!’). In many aspects, this tradition coincides with Salafism’ (Dzhemal 2016c, 243; cf. Laruelle 2016, 91). He thus reduced Shiism to its legal school, which has historically been characterized by a conflict between adherents of taqlīd (conservative emulation) and ijtihād (the quest for renewal through new readings of the Islamic source texts). Dzhemal strongly sided with the latter, against taqlīd (Dzhemal 2008b). And ijtihād, 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 Saraf’al‘naa geografiatsa). 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 Shií 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 unified.

In 1995, Dzhemal founded what he hoped would be such a centre, the ‘Islamic Committee of Russia’ (Islamskii Komitet Rossi), which was established as an organization 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 (Mukhamiatov 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’ (Jacquard 2002, 31) of various shades and colours. The founder of the Congress, the Sudanese religious leader Ḥasan al-Tūrābī, reportedly endorsed Dzhemal’s initiative, since it promoted Islam as a ‘successor of communism on the territory of the former Soviet empire’ (Kudinova 2010, 90).

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 positioned 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 Khassaviurt 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/Icheria’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 (Tiatilov 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 arms).
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 Islamists 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' 2001d, 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 from 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 dār al-İslām (the ‘House of Islam’, in his eyes achieved only in Iran), dār al-kufī (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, dār 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 dār al-kufī but, like most of the Middle East, in dār 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 Dajjål (Antichrist) in the upcoming final battle. This scena­rio has clear eschatological features: we are living immediately before the End of Time. The US is a colonial state that repressed Islam, was already a servant of the Dajjål, 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 origin 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 mujahidin 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: mustad’afin). 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 Islamiintern (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 tsar’ (Dzhemal 2003f, 329–330). Islami­tern 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 the horasan, was still central (Dzhemal 1990, 94), 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’ (istimiaia 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 Abrahamianism, since Abraham was the first to fight against tyranny (Dzhemal 2001b, 38–39).

The opposite of this revolutionary-prophetic mission 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 mufits 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

Muslim modernists, whom he depicted as Masonic-liberal captives of the West (33). In other words, Dzhemal opposed all forms of mainstream Islamic authority that exist at the present time, in Russia and beyond.

Although all three Abrahamic religions are at their core ‘theologies of revolution’, peaceful coexistence between the three is impossible: eucumenism is a thing of the priests’ who support each other across all denominations (19–20). Peace will come only after Judgment Day. True Judaism, in Dzhemal’s view, had already been exterminated in the course of the Jewish revolts (13), and similarly, contemporary Christianity has nothing to do with Christ’s message; the European churches have simply institutionalized social injustice.

The true religion of the prophets is in mortal, irreplaceable confrontation with the natural world religions, such as the religion of the priests (zhretsovs), of Plato, of Aristotle, Brahma­ism, Taoism, and so forth. [...] And those who teach the unity of all traditions (including Christianity and Islam), [...] simply do not understand what the prophets have spoken about. (19)

While he also saw the Russian Orthodox Church as being on the side of the rich and the powerful (Sozaev-Gur’ev 2010), Dzhemal nevertheless regarded Orthodox Christians as potential allies in the initial phases of the war against the Antichrist (Dzhemal 2009, 384).

And Islam, too, needs to be completely reconfigured. In Dzhemal’s reading of Q 2.143, ‘We made you a community standing in the middle (ummatan wasatan)’ does not mean (as most scholars have it, including the Muslim Brotherhood) that the Islamic community should be ‘moderate’, in the sense of ‘in the middle between the extremes’. Rather, for Dzhemal this verse meant that the Islamic umma is now ‘at the centre of human history’ (Dzhemal 2005, 5). Today, only ‘authentic’ Islam has preserved the transformative energy of the prophetic revolutions.

In Dzhemal’s definition, this is ‘the Islam of those who are willing to shed their blood for Allah’, who accomplish the mission transmitted from the Jews and the early Christians (Kudinova 2010, 156–157). The task of the Islamic community is to produce ‘heroic elites’, people with a militant psychology who will become the basis of the future ruling class in the Islamic umma (Dzhemal 1999a, 33). A faith must be aggressive, must be passionate (passionarnyi), a term that Dzhemal perhaps borrowed from the historical, ethnological and anthropological works of Eurasianist Lev N. Gumilev (1912–1992). The passionarnyi oppose the cynicism that is dominant in our time, and the ‘tolerance towards everything’ (34). And eventually, in 2010, Dzhemal praised Russia’s top jihadist, Said Buriatski (1992–2010), as such a fighter for the ‘genuine’ power of Islam against ‘kafir neoliberalism’ (Dzhemal 2010c, 85–86). A Duma deputy had wanted to bring Dzhemal to court in 2009 (in the context of Dzhemal’s appraisal of the Islamists who in 2005 carried out attacks in the Kabardino-Balkarian capital of Nalchik ‘as heroes’), but the case was dropped (Kavkaz-uzel 2016).

For Dzhemal, mujahidin should direct the Muslim community and conduct grassroots uprisings against illegitimate religious authorities. According to Dzhemal, Q 4.59 (‘Have recourse to the idū al-amr [the people of authority] among you’) does not mean that Muslims should obey dynastic rulers, or scholars of Islamic law, as conventional Qur’ān commentators wrongly have it. Rather, the verse means that leaders must rise up from
which was the soil on which both Christianity and Islam grew. In the Islamic tradition, more inspired, attempt at 'revolutionary globalism' (Dzhemal' 2001c, 216). While hordes of Gog and Magog, which are generally associated with Turan, the Central which was the soil on which both Christianity and Islam grew. In the Islamic tradition, more inspired, attempt at 'revolutionary globalism' (Dzhemal' 2001c, 216). While hordes of Gog and Magog, which are generally associated with Turan, the Central...
Volga region, Siberia and Kazakhstan united in the National Organization of Russian Muslims (Natsional'naia Organizatsiia Russkikh Musul'man; 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 (Mirofianov 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 Sozay-Gur'ev 2010). Likewise, Sidirov began to accuse Dzemal of preaching ‘heretical Shiism’ and ‘Caucasian racism’, and of contradicting Islam ‘in any version of its classical schools’ (Sidirov 2015b, 3). Eventually, Sidirov sought integration into another Islamic diaspora, the international Murabitun movement established by Scotsman Ian Dullees. With its home basis in Cape Town, the Murabitun adhere to the Maliki madhab (school of Islamic law), coupled with Shi'i Sufism, both of North African origin. Eventually, in 2007 NORM officially adopted the Maliki madhab (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 (Sidirov) 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 automatic Muslins, and thus remained marginal to 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 Karamatl'uki (Dzemal’ 2010a), he dealt with contemporary political developments especially in Ingushetia, Chechnya and Daghestan. 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 Eroliev (Dzemal’ 2008b) and the Daghestani Islamist and gangster Nadirshakh Khachilaev (Dzemal’ 2003b). Equally prominent are essays on Dzhemal’s diaspora and on the ‘Wall of Dhû Qarnayn’ (Dzhemal’ 2008c, 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 Caucasian as an entity separate from the rest of Russia, and seems to have given up on Russia’s satirical 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 submission 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 Caucasian 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 blazing in Russian society since the early 2000s; he openly declared his opposition to the current regime, participated in the annual Dissenters’ Marches (March nes­gla­niki), 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 Hezbollah. 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 Shvechenko 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 (Anaar 2012). The incident sparked an open letter of support for Dzhemal; among its 464 signatories, we find not only well-known journalists like Shvechenko and Aleksandr Prokhanov (of the radical left-wing newspaper Zavtra), and controversial Islamic intellectuals (such as Aslambek Ezhav and Fauzia Baimanova, 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 avoided discussing the traditional theological and ritual differences between such groups). In fact, he was trying to build bridges between the various camps while at the same time radically rejecting the conventional essence of each of them. Importantly, Dzhemal exploited the fact that Russia’s mainstream Islamic authorities have so far failed to distinguish themselves as independent thinkers.

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. ‘Dai borai Haydar Jamal va ta’isiti u dar bedori mardomi Osiyvi markazi.’ Personal message from Muhiddin Kabir 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 Sibhatullina’s article in the present issue.

References

Unless otherwise noted, all electronic references were still available on 5 December 2016.


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

5. ‘Dar borai Haydar Jamal va ta’isiti u dar bedori mardomi Osiyvi markazi.’ Personal message from Muhiddin Kabir to Dr Sophie Roche (Heidelberg), on behalf of the authors. 4 December 2016.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.