

Factors Preventing the Actualisation of *Ummah Wasaʿa* in the Republic of Tatarstan, Russia

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Abstract: This article discusses the traits of the concept of *ummaḥ wasaʿa*, its historical roots, and its modern application to the Muslim community of the Republic of Tatarstan, Russia. It identifies the main factors preventing the actualisation of the “justly balanced” *ummaḥ* standards in Tatarstan. The study was conducted using the textual analysis methodology with reference to the pertinent literature in English and Russian. The main finding of this article is that the establishment of *ummaḥ wasaʿa* among the Muslims in Tatarstan is challenging at the present time due to the Tatars’ identity crisis, disunity among the various factions of Muslims at various levels, the pressures coming from the law enforcement agencies, and the absence of a strong umbrella organisation.

Keywords: *Ummah wasaʿa*, Islam in Russia, Muslims in Tatarstan, Russia.

Introduction

The positivist thinking that is prevalent in the world today has no place for the analysis of societies, communities, cultures, and civilisations on the basis of an ideal. Normative thinking is almost absent from the discourse of the modern social sciences. This leads to a situation whereby the ideal way of life and the ideal community are looked at as impossible and, therefore, a waste of time. Hence, what is missing in this discourse is the ultimate example towards which people must strive for. Instead, some transitory milestone is taken as the guiding principle of life, such as material progress, economic development or international peace and security. No doubt, these milestones are important during

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the lifespan of any state. However, they will not provide the ultimate blueprint for life on this earth.

The Creator chose Islam as the ultimate way of life, which has been actualised by the civilisation built on the foundations of the Qur'an and Sunnah. The Prophet of Allah (PBUH) succeeded, with the help of his *Rabb* and companions, in building a true society that is an example for generations starting from his own and until the Day of Judgment. The Qur'an has special terms to refer to that kind of society: *Khair Ummah* (the best nation) and *Ummah Wasa'ata* (justly balanced nation).

The foregoing discussion in this paper will accordingly be based on the concepts of "the best nation" and the "justly balanced nation". This paper will expound on these concepts and illustrate the characteristics of the best nation, what it takes to build one, and what factors prevent its actualisation, with special reference to the Republic of Tatarstan, Russia.

Definition of *Ummah Wasa'ata*

Ummah is an important term in the Qur'an. Lane (1864, p.90) mentions the following meanings of the word in his Arabic-English lexicon: (i) a way, course, mode or manner of acting or conduct, or the like; (ii) religion; one course which people follow in religion; (iii) obedience; (iv) people of a particular religion; (v) a collective body [of men or other living beings]; (vi) people, community, tribe, kinsfolk, or party; (vii) a generation of men, people of one time; (viii) a righteous man who is an object of imitation; (ix) one who follows the true religion, holding or doing what is different from, or contrary to, all other religions; and (x) a man, combining all kinds of good qualities.

Al-Ahsan (1992, pp. 11-27) discusses *umma* as a community, originating from one source and holding onto a particular ideology or belief that makes its followers inclined towards goodness; a community which is also God-conscious and having a definitive time-frame.

The subject matter of this paper is the "mid-most community", or "justly balanced" nation; the definition and the discussion of which are stated below:

Thus have We made you an *Ummat* justly balanced. That ye might be witnesses over the nations, and the Messenger a witness over yourselves.² (*Al-Baqarah*, 2:143)

‘Ali (n.d.) also comments on the above verse accordingly:

Justly balanced: The essence of Islam is to avoid all extravagances on either side. It is a sober, practical religion. But the Arabic word (*wasat*) also implies a touch of the literal meaning of Intermediacy. Geographically Arabia is in an intermediate position in the Old World, as was proved in history by the rapid expansion of Islam, north, south, east and west. (p.57)

Qutb (n.d.) defines *ummah wasaṭa*:

The term is used here in a very broad sense. Thus, the Muslim community, or *ummah*, to use the Qur’anic term, is a middle of-the-road community which stands witness against other nations and communities in the sense that it upholds and defends justice and equality for all people. It weighs up their values, standards, traditions, concepts and objectives, judging them as either true or false. It occupies the dual position of being a witness against mankind and an umpire administering justice among them. God’s Messenger, Muhammad, is in turn a witness against the Muslim community in the sense that, as its leader and guardian, he defines its aims, activities and obligations, and charts the direction it should take. His teachings, example and leadership stimulate the community to appreciate its role and position in the world, and live up to their requirements.

Mawdūdī (n.d.) in his tafsīr, *Tafhīm al-Qur’ān*, comments on this same verse that *ummah wasaṭa* is “a righteous and noble community... [that] follows the middle course and deals out justice evenly to the

² For translation of the verses of the Qur’an into English, this article refers to: ‘Abdullāh Yūsuf ‘Alī, *The Holy Qur’ān: English Translation of the Meanings and Commentary* (Saudi Arabia: King Fahd Holy Qur’ān Printing Complex, n.d.).

nations of the world as an impartial judge, and bases all its relations with other nations on truth and justice”.

Ibn Kathīr (n.d., pp. 420-421) in his famous *tafsīr* asserts that the word “*wasaf*” means the best and most honoured. He also quotes the hadīth narrated by Imam Ahmad on the authority of Abū Sa‘īd Al-Khudrī, where Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) confirms that “*wasaf*” means “just”.

According to Al-Munajjid (2010), “what is meant by *ummatan wasata* is just and best”. Hassan (2013, p. 13) concurs with this view, whereby he notes that “*Al-Wasafiyah* ... is justice”, which includes all types of justice in relation to Allah, the religion, human beings, and other creatures. Lane (1864) translates the verse, “*ja‘alnākum ummatan wasafa*” as, “We have made you to be a nation conforming, or conformable to the just mean; just, equitable, or good” (p. 2942). Kamali (2010) states that:

Moderation, or *wasafiyah* (Arabic synonyms: *tawassuf*, *i‘tidāl*, *tawāzun*, *iqtiṣād*) is closely aligned with justice, and means opting for a middle position between two extremes, often used interchangeably with ‘average’, ‘core’, ‘standard’, ‘heart’ and ‘non-aligned’...In its Arabic usage, *wasafiyah* also means the best choice... *Wasafiyah* is both quantitative and qualitative (pp. 2-3).

Hence, it is evident from the above examples that the majority of commentators and scholars accept the opinion that the terms “*wasaf*” means just, best, and being in the middle. This quality of the most just, or justly balanced, or the best nation, is linked to the notion of responsibility to be a witness against other tribes and nations who failed to accept the divine trust from Allah. According to a *Hadith Qudsī*, narrated by Al-Bukhari, Tirmidhi, and Ibn Majah, from Abū Sa‘īd Al-Khudrī, on the Day of Judgement, people from the times of the earlier prophets (peace be upon them all) will be brought before the Creator and will claim that they had not received the message of the true religion (monotheism). However, to counter their arguments, the *ummah* of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) will be brought forth in order to testify that all the previous prophets had fulfilled their missions.

Characteristics of the *Ummah Wasaṭa*

Based on the explanations described earlier on *ummaḥ wasata*, the characteristics of what makes a nation the best and most just will be discussed in this section.

The Qur'an concisely describes the *ummaḥ* in the following verses:

Thus have We made you an *Ummat* justly balanced. That ye might be witnesses over the nations, and the Messenger a witness over yourselves (*Al-Baqarah*, 2:143).

Let there arise out of you a band of people inviting to all that is good, enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong: they are the ones to attain felicity (*Āl-ʿImrān*, 3:104).

Ye are the best of peoples, evolved for mankind. Enjoining what is right, forbidding what is wrong, and believing in Allah (*Āl-ʿImrān*, 3:110).

They believe in Allah and the Last Day; they enjoin what is right, and forbid what is wrong; and they hasten (in emulation) in all good works; they are in the ranks of the righteous (*Āl-Imran*, 3:114).

The Believers, men and women, are protectors, one of another: they enjoin what is just, and forbid what is evil; they observe regular prayers, pay *zakat* and obey Allah and His Messenger, on them will Allah pour His mercy, for Allah is Exalted in power, Wise (*Al-Taubah*, 9:71).

Those that turn to Allah in repentance: that serve Him and praise Him: that wander in devotion to Cause of Allah; that bow down and prostrate themselves in prayer; that enjoin good and forbid evil; and observe the limits set by Allah, - the do rejoice. So proclaim the glad tidings to the Believers (*Al-Taubah*, 9:112).

Based on these verses, the qualities of this *ummaḥ* could be summarised as follows:

1. Enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong (evil)

2. Firm and unwavering belief in Allah
3. Establishment of prayer
4. Distribution of the voluntary charity and the obligatory *zakat*
5. Piety (*taqwā*)
6. Justice
7. Perseverance
8. Doing good deeds

All of the above stated qualities ensure that the humanity at large and the Muslims, in particular, attain the status of *falāḥ* – i.e. prosperity, success, and happiness (Lane, 1864, p. 2439). The following verses from *Sūrah al-Baqarah* gives a very brief and accurate description of those who are successful:

This is the Book; in it is guidance, without doubt, to those who fear Allah; who believe in the unseen, are steadfast in prayer, and spend out of what We have provided for them; and who believe in the revelation sent to thee, and sent before thy time, and (in their hearts) have the assurance of the hereafter. They are on true guidance from their Lord, and it is these who will prosper (*Al-Baqarah* 2:1-5).

Hence, the Lord wants the humanity to become just and prosperous; attainment of which is possible with the guidance from Him. He, therefore, revealed the Holy Qur'an to the best of His creations, and His messenger, Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), who would also leave his example for others to follow.

In the next section, this paper will present a brief outline of the characteristics of the early Muslims, who by learning directly from the Messenger of Allah (PBUH), helped shape the *ummah wasaṭa*.

Characteristics of Early Muslims That Shaped the Concept of *Ummah Wasaṭa*

Besides the description given by Allah in the Holy Qur'an, one can observe the following traits that made Muslims distinct from others in their outlook on life:

1. Absolute conviction of the oneness of Allah, i.e. *Tawḥīd*
2. Sincere love of the Prophet of Allah (PBUH)
3. Utmost passion and obedience in carrying out duties as prescribed by Allah and His Messenger (PBUH).

In order to judge the level of the transformative power of Islam on early Muslims, one must look at the character of the Arabs before Islam and how they had changed upon accepting the faith. One great example is that of ‘Umar bin Al-Khaṭṭāb (may Allah be pleased with him). He was one of those who vehemently opposed Islam when it first appeared in Makkah. Since he was one of the rich noble men of the Quraish (from the ‘Ādi clan), he was afraid for the status of Makkah as it was upheld due to the presence of the Ka‘bah where the Arabs went for pilgrimage yearly, and where a great amount of traffic and trade meant great profits for the host tribe – the Quraish. Al-Sallabi (n.d.) pointed out that “[T]he rich men of Makkah resisted this religion and persecuted the weak among its converts, and Umar was at the forefront of those who persecuted these weak ones” (p.48). Thus, Umar (RA) beat a slave woman who had embraced Islam until he got tired. However, he, too, accepted Islam after having vowed to kill Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) for allegedly sowing the seeds of discord among the people of Makkah that affected families and traditions of this city (Al-Sallabi, n.d. pp.51-56). After the conversion, ‘Umar defended Islam more vehemently than he did during the *jāhilīyah* (age of ignorance).

The distinction of ‘Umar and of many other companions of the Prophet (PBUH) was in trying to sincerely acquire, internalise, and practice the character learnt from their teacher, Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). The three actions stated above were the main reasons for the actualisation of *Ummah Wasaṭa* in reality, which in the present time is quite elusive.

Indeed, early Muslims, the companions of the Prophet (PBUH), and those who followed them with sincerity, made it possible for later generations to describe the best nation, learn its traits, and aspire to achieve that status. However, inevitably, with the weakening position of the Qur’an in the lives of the Muslims of later generations, the *ummaḥ* had lost its high status. Therefore, this paper will look at the various reasons for the Muslims’ weaknesses in the next section of this article.

Reasons for Muslims' Weaknesses

According to Arslan (2004), "Today, Muslims – or at least most of them – have lost their zeal, their fervour and their ennobling devotion for their Faith" (p.9). The author compares the zeal with which European powers went to war with each other in the beginning of the 20th century, how much they spent on war efforts, and how many men they had lost, with the Muslims' contemporary condition and asks who is able to sacrifice so much for their faith and country. Arslan (2004) states that:

Without suffering in the spirit of self-abnegation and the readiness to court death, without spending their wealth and properties, without the burning zeal for pursuing the right path prescribed by God, Muslims instead hope to protect their dignity, honour and independence by merely praying to God for help, totally ignoring the conditions prescribed by Allah for His help (p.11).

With Islam spread throughout the land in the early years with the help of nothing but deep faith, reliance on Allah, obedience to Him and His prophet, one can notice that the ensuing weaknesses of the Muslim *Ummah* is due to the gradual loss of that zeal to sacrifice one's self for Allah's cause.

As a result, the *umma* today has achieved nothing but "*khusrān*", and is generally in a state of loss. Allah, in contrast to *al-Falāḥ*, gives a detailed description of that state in the Qur'an. The following are just a few of those verses:

"I will mislead them, and I will create in them false desires; I will order them to slit the ears of cattle, and do deface the nature created by Allah," whoever, forsaking Allah, takes satan for a friend, hath of a surety suffered a loss that is manifest (*An-Nisā*, 4:119).

...It is they who have lost their own souls that will not believe (*Al-An'ām* 6:12).

As those who believe not in the hereafter, We have made their deeds pleasing in their eyes; and so they wander blindly. Such are they for whom a grievous chastisement is (waiting); and in the hereafter theirs will be the greatest loss (*Al-Naml* 27:4-5).

Thus, the true loss is for those who do not believe in Allah and the Hereafter, and do not follow the Messengers. Consequently, they are incapable of carrying the banner of *ummah wasa'ah* to the world.

After having looked at some of the important reasons for the Muslims' weaknesses in today's world, this article will, in the next few pages, look at the case of the Republic of Tatarstan, which is in the Russian Federation, and the present factors preventing the actualisation of *ummah wasa'ah* in that particular region.

The Republic of Tatarstan: A General Outline

Before delving into the issue of factors preventing the actualisation of *ummah wasa'ah* in Tatarstan, a brief introduction about this republic from the historical, political, and economic perspectives will be presented.

The Republic of Tatarstan is located about 800 kilometres east of Moscow at the confluence of two rivers, Volga and Kama, with the capital city of Kazan. Its size is comparable to that of Lithuania or Georgia. With a population of about four million people, it enjoys a notable status among other regions of Russia. By having an intensive manufacturing economy, a strong oil and gas industry, highly skilled workforce, and a comparatively high level of a service industry, this small republic is an example of a state with high income and a high economic development within the Russian Federation (www.tatarstan.ru).

The ethnic Tatars make up of more than half of the population, whose language is related to the Turkic group of languages. The majority of the Tatars belong to the Sunni branch of Islam, but only a fraction really practices the religion on a daily basis (even though this number grows steadily).

Historically, the Tatars accepted Islam in the 10th century CE, about half a century before the Russians accepted Orthodox Christianity. At that time, the ancestors of the modern Tatars were called Bulghars, who lived in their independent kingdom. The kingdom was known for its trade connections with the East and the West, as well as crafts and strong beautiful buildings. It was the Bulghar Kingdom that stood as a natural bastion between the Mongol invaders of the 13th century CE and

Europe, until it had finally merged with the empire of Genghis Khan in 1236, and later became a part of the Golden Horde.

However, the most difficult time for this nation did not come with the Mongols, but with the Russian invasion in 1552, when, after a long siege, the city of Kazan was over-run by Ivan IV's (also known as Ivan the Terrible) forces, murdering over 100,000 of its male inhabitants and enslaving women and children. From that time onwards, this area was incorporated into Russia and the persecution of the Muslims continued well into the 20th century.

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Tatarstan remained within the confines of the Russian Federation. In 1992, the Republic of Tatarstan held a referendum on the independence from Russia, and 62 percent of those who participated, voted in favour of independence. It was in Kazan, the capital city of Tatarstan, that the first President of the Russian Federation, Boris Yeltsin (1931-2007), made his oft-quoted statement to Russia's different regions: "Take as much sovereignty as you can swallow". However, in reality, the movement of independence among the areas of the Volga region and the Northern Caucasus resulted in the First Chechen War (1994-1996), leaving a death toll of 7,500 Russian military casualties, 4,000 Chechen combatants and no less than 35,000 civilians — a minimum total of 46,500, while others have cited figures within the range of 80,000 to 100,000.

Nevertheless, despite the quashed hopes for independence, Tatarstan witnessed an Islamic renaissance, when hundreds of mosques were built, many Islamic educational institutions were opened, *halāl* businesses emerged, and Islamic publications mushroomed. Thus, during the 1990s, which many observers call the chaotic decade, Islam and Muslims, particularly in Tatarstan, have benefitted greatly.

However, after the events in New York on September 11, 2001, the Russian government and the law enforcement agencies began to pressure Russian Muslims. The main culprit was the Law on Countering Extremist Activities,³ which was passed in July 2002. As a result of this law, discrimination and violation of the rights of Muslims increased

³ Its full name is "On Countering Extremist Activities" ("*Zakon o Protivodeystvii Extremistskoy Deyatelnosti*") No.114-ФЗ. <http://base.garant.ru/12127578/> Accessed on November 9, 2017.

dramatically. The media began their own attacks by adopting a visibly hostile approach to portraying anything that had to do with Islam or Muslims. The increased cases of xenophobia, hatred, discrimination, and intolerance were presented yearly in the Annual Report on International Religious Freedom issued by the US Department of State.⁴ Various other similar reports by local Russian as well as foreign human rights organisations have confirmed such mistreatment and biasness towards Muslims.⁵

Nevertheless, Muslims continue to live their normal lives, contributing to the economy, paying taxes, sending their sons to serve in the Russian army, and being productive members of the society. All of these positive contributions are due to the relative peace, stability, and educated members of the community. Having briefly discussed about Tatars, their status, and belief, the question remains as to whether or not the Muslim of Tatarstan are able to present Islam in the best manner possible, and if not, what is preventing the local Muslim *ummaḥ* from becoming a “justly balanced nation”.

Factors Preventing the Actualisation of *Ummaḥ Wasaṭa* in Tatarstan

Notwithstanding the relative calm and an opportunity for Muslims to consolidate, their unity seems elusive. Hence, the Muslim *ummaḥ* of the Republic of Tatarstan is, at the moment, far from being a justly balanced *ummaḥ*, although it has the potential to be one. Following is the review of that potential and the factors preventing the Muslims of Tatarstan from becoming a truly *ummaḥ wasaṭa*.

Historically, Tatar Muslims of the Volga-Ural region have been exemplified as the most advanced and most educated among Russia’s Muslims, and less prone to radicalism. This statement has a solid base

⁴ International Religious Freedom Report for 2012: Russia. (US Department of State: Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor). <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm#wrapper> Accessed on November 9, 2017.

⁵ For more information, see reports by: (i) SOVA, a Russian information and analytics centre, <http://www.sova-center.ru/>; (ii) Moscow-Helsinki Group, <http://www.mhg.ru>; (iii) Forum 18 News Service, <http://www.forum18.org>; (iv) Memorial Human Rights Center, <http://memo.ru>.

to rest upon, due to following reasons: 1) high literacy rates; 2) better economic development; 3) a long history of co-existence with the ethnic Russians; and, 4) the Muslims being less combative.

The main reason for asserting that the Tatar Muslims are better positioned to be the bearers of the torch of Islam in Russia (even though it is a highly debatable statement) is because of their high level of education. Tatarstan alone boasts 30 local universities and 56 branches, with a student population of over 200,000. In addition, there are 137 colleges providing education to approximately 85,000 students. Islamic education is represented by one Russian Islamic institute (formerly a university), the Bulghar Islamic Academy, and numerous *madrasahs* positioned throughout the republic. This high level of education gives them the opportunity to present Islam and themselves as Muslims to the wider society on various levels, such as education, business, culture, and sports.

In terms of economic development, the Republic of Tatarstan is one of the leading regions in the Russian Federation where the economy is experiencing a degree of progress, not seen in many other parts of Russia. For example, the Gross Regional Product of Tatarstan in 2016 was RUB1.9 trillion (approx. US\$29.2 billion), the official unemployment rate at the end of 2017 was 0.5 percent, and the average salary is approximately RUB32,144 (approx. US\$480) (<http://tatarstan.ru/eng/about/economy.htm>).

The long history of coexistence between the Tatars and the Russians inevitably led to periods of calm and peace, whereby the people learned to tolerate each other on a daily basis. This is especially true for the last approximately one hundred years, as the area has been dominated by a secular (communist and, then, democratic) ideology.

The Muslims of Tatarstan are considered to be more moderate and less aggressive in nature in comparison with, for instance, the Muslims of North Caucasus. This gives them the opportunity to secure peace and progress.⁶

⁶ There have been attempts to destabilise the republic via a low-level extremist activity, most of which is media frenzy with little substance.

Where the factors preventing the actualisation of *ummaḥ wasaṭa* in the Republic of Tatarstan are concerned, the major factors are: 1) identity crisis; 2) disunity and discord at various levels; 3) absence of a strong umbrella organisation; and, 4) pressures from law enforcement agencies.

Identity Crisis

Identity crisis is a very serious issue as Tatars are trying to come to grips with this contemporary challenge. There are constant debates among the Internet-savvy Tatars and on the pages of local newspapers, as to who they really are: Tatar Muslims or Muslim Tatars. The distinction, though subtle and seemingly semantic, is quite profound indeed. The Tatar nationalist movement has been active within the republic since the fall of the Soviet Union. It is the one that initiated the unsuccessful bid for independence in the beginning of the 1990s, organised the cancellation of the Russian presidential elections in 1991, and was instrumental in increasing the national and Islamic awareness among the Tatars. However, today, after over two decades of the nationalist movement, the Tatars, especially in urban centres such as Kazan, are at the crossroads and are trying to find an answer about their identity. Some groups strongly identify themselves as Muslims and their *qibla* (direction) is towards Makkah. Others are staunch Tatar nationalists, whose *qibla* is in the direction of the nation itself, and want to protect its language and culture no matter what. For this second group, the Tatar culture, as manifested in Tatar songs, festivals, literature, theatre, and the like, is the main thrust of all attention and aspirations. Furthermore, it is more important for this group to have Tatar schools, Tatar media, and Tatar song contests than acknowledging their religious roots and practicing them. The ruins of the Bulghar⁷ township is more important than the Islamic teachings associated with this formerly great city on the river of Volga (Idel). However, there are other Tatars who readily identify themselves with Russia and are concerned about the country as a whole and have neither nationalist nor religious aspirations. Many of these people do not speak the language and do not follow the religion of

⁷ The capital city of the Bulghar Kingdom was built in the 10th century CE and was destroyed in the 15th century.

their forefathers. This group primarily consists of atheist academics and other professionals, raised and educated during the Soviet time.

Disunity and discord at various levels

Disunity among the Muslims is evident throughout the world. The Arab Spring has showed how the society can be easily divided and all social institutions destroyed within days, while rebuilding is excruciatingly slow. Many countries of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region are still in the grips of instability and virtual mayhem. However, it is not only the Muslim-majority countries located in the MENA region that are in discord. The situation in the Western democratic countries is becoming more and more poignant, and seemingly moving in the wrong direction with lack of morality being the strongest factor. Despite the perceived stability and economic progress, Russia is experiencing a slow process of decay from the inside. Muslims are not spared from this fate within this large country, including Tatarstan. As consumerism has replaced the need for ethics in consumption, the psychology of the masses has been affected. People compete with each other for the better things in life, such as properties, automobiles, electronic gadgets, education, and the like. Muslims are not spared either. Due to that skewed vision of reality, the Qur'an has become part of the furniture and does not decorate the hearts and minds of Muslims.

The question, therefore, arises: what is there to substantiate the assertion about the disunity of Muslims in Tatarstan? There are several categories of Muslim groups within the republic, each having its own stance with regards to matters of *fiqh* and outlook on relations with the government, fellow citizens and other Muslims. The dominant group is the one that professes the Ḥanafī *madhhab* and is not very tolerant towards other schools of thought within the confines of Tatarstan (although they recognize the Shafī'ī *madhhab* for the Muslims of Caucasus). The Spiritual Board of Muslims of Tatarstan (*muftiyat*) states that it acts in accordance with: (i) the revelation from Allah – Al-Qur'an; (ii) the Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH); and (iii) the norms of the Sharī'ah that result from *ijtihād* of the *fuqahā* and the *'ulamā*, which follows the Qur'an and Sunnah as expounded by Abū Ḥanīfah. One of its goals is to ensure the “canonical unity of the Muslim religious organisations on the bases of Al-Qur'an and Sunnah in accordance with

the religious doctrine of Imām Abū Ḥanīfah”.⁸ While the mainstream group is not so tolerant, others, particularly the Salafi groups, are even more intolerant. The Sufis are not very evident.

According to official Muslim religious authorities (*muftiyat*), the so-called “traditional” Islam of the Tatars is the one conforming to the teachings of Imām Abū Ḥanīfah. However, the way it has developed over the ages is that many innovations and peculiar cultural norms have entered into the doctrine, and local Muslims are supposed to follow that peculiar version of the Hanafi *madhhab*. If one does not follow the cultural interpretation of the *madhhab*, it may have serious negative consequences. For example, not wearing socks in the mosque is considered to be against the teaching and is frowned upon. Likewise, performing daily Muslim rituals in a way that is different from the locals may spell trouble for the performer as he or she may become the target of verbal attacks by the “traditionalists”.

The younger generation, however, is more tolerant in this sense, and there are those among them who do not follow the traditional way of prayer, dress, or religious and semi-religious festivals (e.g. the *Mawlid* and *Sabantuy*⁹). As the number of educated Muslims and access to media increases, so does the awareness among the Muslim youths about the “other” faces of Islamic practice. Many choose the “other” due to their rebellious nature, Islamic education from outside Tatarstan, or influence from someone who has studied abroad. This group is not very large but is growing steadily to the extent that the *muftiyat* is becoming increasingly worried because it is the young generation that internalises these ideas and tries to convey them to the followers of the mainstream teaching. This creates tensions within the *ummaḥ*, since the local government supports the official *muftiyat* and gets more actively involved in the lives of the Muslims (despite the state’s secular nature that is spelled out in the constitution). This, in turn, leads to policies and perspectives within the government circles that are skewed towards

⁸ See the following official website of the *muftiyat* for more information on this organisation, its goals, and activities (in Russian and Tatar languages): <http://dumrt.ru/dumrt> Accessed on November 9, 2017.

⁹ *Sabantuy* – a traditional Tatar and Bashqort festival that celebrates the end of the sowing season. It can be translated as “festival of the plough”.

“traditional” Islam at the expense of other not less traditional versions of Islamic culture and heritage (Fagan, 2009).

Absence of a Strong Umbrella Organisation

The lack of unity among the Muslims of Tatarstan is largely because of the absence of a strong umbrella organisation that could represent the whole local *ummah* and lead it to enjoin what is right and forbid what is evil. The existing spiritual board of Muslims in Tatarstan is a weak organisation and, as discussed earlier, promotes an exclusive type of “traditional” Islam. The events of the summer of 2012 shook its foundations because of an “assassination” attempt on the *Mufti*,¹⁰ Ildus Faizov, while his deputy, Valiulla Yakupov, was murdered outside his apartment in Kazan. Later on, Ildus Faizov stepped down from his position, and a new *mufti* was elected in April 2013 (28-year old Kamil Samigullin). It was hoped that the new *mufti* with his team would bring fresh ideas and would promote an inclusive type of Islam and represent other “non-traditional” Muslims as well.

Pressures from Law Enforcement Agencies

All of the points discussed earlier gives law enforcement agencies a free hand to operate as they will against Muslims. Using the extremist law and the federal list of banned books as their guiding light, the police and the federal security agencies undertake massive operations to “uncover” the extremists and potential terrorists in the republic. Consequently, the police and the FSB (formerly known as KGB) searched the homes of dozens of Muslims and made numerous arrests on the grounds of having discovered banned literature; even to the extent that older Muslim ladies, who used to read the works of the famous Muslim scholar, Said Nursi, were threatened and kept in police custody for several hours (Fagan, 2013). Hence, it is very challenging for Muslims to stick to their faith in the atmosphere of suspicion and surveillance by the authorities without compromising on certain aspects of Islam, such as *da'wah* and outward appearances.

10 In the Russian context, the position of *mufti* is the “head of religious organisation”, who may not be qualified to issue fatwas.

To sum up, the Muslims of the Republic of Tatarstan are not at the moment in a position to be an exemplar *ummaḥ*, i.e. to be the best, moderate, mid-most, and justly balanced. The reasons are both internal and external. Tatars, as a nation, are quite divided and are in search of a national idea. Some of them want it to be based on religion, while others are professing a sort of enlightened secular idea where the position of religion is quite remote, focusing instead on culture, language, and economic development. Muslims themselves are a divided lot despite the so-called “Hanafi monopoly”. Moreover, the organisation that is supposed to unite the Muslims is very slow to adapt to the changing environment, and the law enforcement agencies are all too happy to use this situation for their advantage, in which they are able to pick and choose targets for persecution.

Conclusion

This paper discussed the issue of *ummaḥ wasaṭa*, and whether the Muslims of Tatarstan could constitute such a noble nation. After defining the terms of *ummaḥ*, *khair ummaḥ*, and *ummaḥ wasaṭa*, a short description of such a community was discussed with examples given of the early Muslims. The life of ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb (RA), whose complete transformation from *jāhilīyyah* to *Islam*, *Imān*, and *Iḥsan*, is of particular interest in this regard, and therefore, constitute a great case study of the building blocks of that great nation. The companions of the Prophet (PBUH), such as ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, Abū Bakr, Bilāl bin Rabaḥ, ‘Alī bin Abū Ṭālib, ‘Uthmān bin ‘Affān, and others, had an unwavering conviction about the Prophet’s mission, unshakeable belief in Allah, the prophets and the unseen, and they loved the Prophet (PBUH) dearly and obeyed him without hesitation or regret. These characteristics gave a strong impetus for the growth and expansion of Islam’s sphere of influence in the world.

However, the *ummaḥ*’s weaknesses and subsequent failure to uphold the status of “*ummaḥ wasaṭa*” is due to the loss of zeal to sacrifice one’s self to uphold Allah’s cause, love of this world, and dislike of the Hereafter. These traits led to a state of loss, and the true losers are those who, according to the Qur’an, follow their desires, take Satan for a friend, and do not believe in the Hereafter.

In the last two sections of this paper, a brief introduction on the Republic of Tatarstan, its present condition, and some of the challenges faced by the Muslims there are discussed. Among the challenges mentioned are xenophobia, discrimination, mistreatment, and biasness towards the Muslims.

Lastly, the Muslims of the Republic of Tatarstan, despite the advancements and relative freedom, are quite far from the status of a “justly balanced nation” that could be a witness over other nations and communities. The factors preventing its actualisation are numerous, and only four have been identified which are: identity crisis, disunity, absence of a strong umbrella organisation, and pressures from law enforcement agencies.

It is hoped that the younger generation of Muslims in Tatarstan will be more cautious about the disunity in their ranks, accept Islam fully as their identity, and build an organisation that will be able to genuinely represent all of them equally. Lastly, it is hoped that change within the Russian society, especially among the Muslims, whether in Moscow, Kazan, Ufa, Groznyi or Makhachkala, will be positive and will be achieved through peaceful means.

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