MUSLIM MINORITIES IN WESTERN SOCIETIES: UNDER TSARS AND COMMISSARS

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Islam is often described as the second and fastest growing religion in a wide range of contemporary Western societies,1 extending from Canada and the U.S.A. through the countries of the European Union to the Balkans and the Russian Republic. In almost all the said countries, however, Muslims live as minorities at risk of a greater or lesser extent. The many and diverse Muslim communities in question may, for our present purposes, be divided into two principal categories.

First amongst these is the centuries-old and historically well established, though often severely tested, Muslim communities of Russia, the Balkans and Eastern Europe. Apart from their antiquity and the fact that they are mostly indigenous to their respective homelands, the minorities in question here have had another and more recent experience in common; namely that, with the exception of Greece, they were all dominated from the Adriatic to Siberia, and for most of the time from at least the Second World War until the collapse of communism in the late eighties and early nineties of the twentieth century, by communist regimes which were therefore ideologically committed to the eradication of all forms of religion.

* This paper is a sequel to the author’s paper entitled “Muslim Minorities in Western Societies: The Medieval Scene” which was first published in Al-Shajarah Vol. 6, No. 1, 2001 and republished in the Special Issues of Al-Shajarah Vol. 8, No. 1, 2003, Special Issue: Published on the Occasion of the Meeting of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), held in Kuala Lumpur: October 11–17, 2003. The two papers are based on the author’s forthcoming book on “Minorities in Muslim and Western Societies”.

1 The term ‘Western’ is used here in the cultural rather than geographical sense: so the America, Australia and New Zealand are also covered.
The second category consists, primarily, of immigrants, mostly from different parts of Asia and Africa who have, mainly since the Second World War, settled in various parts of the British Islands and Western Europe, including, most recently, Denmark, Sweden and Norway as well as the New Worlds of the Americas, the Caribbean, Australia and New Zealand. To this group of immigrants it may, in certain contexts, be appropriate to add the increasingly important, though still relatively small, groups of Europeans and people of European descent who have at different times, especially since the Second World War, embraced Islam and continue to live as Muslims in their respective Western homelands.

Accordingly, indigenous Muslim minorities will be discussed in this paper with special reference to Russia. Others, in the Balkans and Eastern Europe, will be considered separately. The problems and experiences of immigrant Muslim communities in various Western societies will, likewise, be subsequently considered with a view to identifying overall patterns and general trends rather than as separate or distinct case studies.

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In Russia, the most important Muslim minorities have been: (i) the Volga (or Kazan) Tatars; (ii) the Tatars; and (iii) the Bashkirs.

Descended from the Volga Bulgars, turkicised Eastern Finns and the Golden Horde Turkic tribes and mainly based in the Middle Volga where their ancestors attained a high level of urban civilization as long ago as the tenth century, the Volga (or Kazan) Tatars have been—and continue to be—amongst the most resilient and dynamic Muslim peoples of European Russia.

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2 Some of these, it will be remembered, arrived at their various Western destinations at much earlier dates than the Second World War.