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The Integration of Non-Russian Servicemen in the Imperial, Soviet and Russian Army

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“Serving the Homeland is a sacred duty for all religious Muslims” - Interview with Marat-Khazrat Arslanov, Imam, Head of the Department of Military-Patriotic Education of the Council of Muftis of Russia, Moscow, 2 November 2009

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“Serving the Homeland is a sacred duty for all religious Muslims” - Interview with Marat-Khazrat Arslanov, Imam, Head of the Department of Military-Patriotic Education of the Council of Muftis of Russia, Moscow, 2 November 2009

THE ROLE OF REPRESENTATIVE OF MUSLIM SERVICEMEN

- 1 **PIPSS.ORG** - If I'm not mistaken, both the Department of the Council of Muftis of Russia¹, which is concerned with Muslims in the military service, and the position of Representative of Military Muslims were created at the beginning of the first Chechen war in 1994. What is the role of this representative? What are his functions, and have they evolved with time?
- 2 **Marat-Khazrat Arslanov:** First of all, I wish to say that the department and its functions were not at all linked with the Chechen war. The Chechens have their own region, their own bodies and their own staff, even though they are members of the Council of Muftis of Russia.
- 3 The department for Muslim servicemen and prisoners under the auspices of the Council of Muftis of Russia was created because there was a common need for it, as concerned both the army and the Council of Muftis. It was not linked with who was at war and who was not.
- 4 We answer all questions of interest to the different military departments. They write to us or invite us to meet with them - we work together.
- 5 **PIPSS.ORG** – Apart from the military establishment, do you work directly with servicemen? And if so, for what reasons do they contact you? What are their requests, their questions and problems?
- 6 **Marat-Khazrat Arslanov:** Yes, of course we work with them. And we are contacted not only to solve problems, but for various other reasons. Sometimes they write to us on strictly religious questions, sometimes because they would like to have a prayer room in their unit. To obtain one, they have to organize a formal meeting with their commanding officer and submit their request. They need official documents for this, so they turn to us for help. Once these formalities have been dealt with, they can open a small prayer room.
- 7 Some requests concern literature, the need for books – spiritual books. So we meet with the servicemen and try to fulfil their requests. We're also asked for prayer carpets and rosaries – these are very specific demands, but there are also more general, everyday ones related to personal hygiene, when sufficient provision is not made for their needs. Most of the time, soldiers lack money for such needs.
- 8 We provide informal aid. However, if there is a need to speak to the commanding officer, we do so, and if necessary, travel to the unit ourselves.
- 9 **PIPSS.ORG** – Do you ever have to deal with conflicts?
- 10 **Marat-Khazrat Arslanov:** Yes, but they are more related to questions of nationality than to religion. When representatives of different nationalities, with their different traditions, mentalities, cults and cultural particularities live together in one place, there are problems of misunderstanding, and we are also called on to solve these problems. For instance, the most common example is related to the fact that among Muslims, it is not traditional, or even acceptable, for a man to wash the floor – this is strictly a matter of national character. On the other side, for the military, it is a strictly organizational problem. But this issue gets mixed up with religion², so we are called in and we explain to the servicemen that it's only a question of cultural difference, that their reaction is the result of the tradition they were brought up in. But we also tell them that in army conditions they must listen to their commanders and obey orders.

- 11 We explain that from the religious point of view, it is part of one’s faith to serve the Homeland. Some understand, others don’t, but that’s another question. These national specificities exist.
- 12 **PIPSS.ORG** – What do you do if they don’t understand?
- 13 **Marat-Khazrat Arslanov:** In a case like the one I just mentioned, we continue to dialogue with them until they do understand.
- 14 **PIPSS.ORG** – Are the misunderstandings that arise today the same as when the position was created, or have they changed?
- 15 **Marat-Khazrat Arslanov:** As a matter of fact, the same ones are repeated, because different conscripts come and go every year – twice a year new individuals react to the same environment.

COOPERATION BETWEEN THE MINISTRY OF DEFENSE AND THE COUNCIL OF MUFTIS OF RUSSIA AND THE SIGNS OF CHANGE

- 16 **PIPSS.ORG** – The cooperation between the Council of Muftis of Russia and the Ministry of Defense³ led to the publication of brochures in 2004⁴ and to different forms of cooperation, such as the opening of prayer rooms in certain units etc. How do you evaluate this cooperation today? Has the situation of Muslim servicemen in the armed forces improved?
- 17 **Marat-Khazrat Arslanov:** It has definitely improved. I myself was apt for military service a few years ago when I was a teacher in a Muslim temple. And although by law I was supposed to obtain a deferral⁵, I had to go through the *voenkomat*. I went before a commission and they even wanted to send me to a unit in Vladimir –that was 5-6 years ago, in 2003, the year I graduated from the Islamic University⁶. At the time, I knew about the situation in the armed forces thanks to the experiences of friends with whom I had studied at the Islamic University and who had been sent to the army.
- 18 Today, I also hear about the situation in the army and it’s much better. I meet regularly with servicemen, and I can see that things have really improved. Commanders are doing their best to make conditions more acceptable. In addition, there are the brochures intended both for commanding officers and servicemen – informing them of the various cultures and traditions. Problems are often due to the fact that commanding officers and military personnel have no knowledge of the five prayers or of fasting. This lack of knowledge leads to misunderstandings and conflicts. When people are informed of these matters, each one knows his place.
- 19 Nevertheless, two issues remain: food and religious practice. The two are related – there is no other problem.
- 20 I repeat that serving the Homeland is a sacred duty for all religious Muslims.

THE INTRODUCTION OF PERMANENT IMAMS IN THE ARMED FORCES (i.e. permanent, state-employed staff members)

- 21 **PIPSS.ORG** – On July 21st, president Medvedev pledged to hire chaplains from the four traditional religions⁷ (Orthodox, Muslim, Jewish and Buddhist) to serve in the armed forces. If I’m not mistaken, not so long ago, the Council of Muftis was opposed to the introduction of chaplaincy in the armed forces.
- 22 **Marat-Khazrat Arslanov:** Frankly, I am not aware of that point of view, but before the Revolution there was the institution of *akhun* in the armed forces, so this is not new to us. It is just returning today.
- 23 **PIPSS.ORG** – What can you expect from the official introduction of chaplains in the military? What can Muslim imams bring to the army?
- 24 **Marat-Khazrat Arslanov:** First of all, it gives us the opportunity to give more spiritual support to the servicemen. A healthy spirituality is good for the health in general – physical health depends on spiritual health. Unfortunately, not everyone in the younger generation is psychologically healthy. And they are not all able to cope with the army regime – some soldiers break down. A permanent dialogue with this kind of person could help avoid suicides, for instance. This is the first point, the most important – spiritual support.

25 Secondly, problems will be solved more quickly because there will be someone to turn to. If
 26 there is an emergency, no time will be lost. Someone will be there for advice.

26 And finally, servicemen will adapt better, and as a result, will be more useful to their
 Homeland.

27 **PIPSS.ORG** – Do you think imams can be of help in fighting *dedovshchina*? The Orthodox
 Church, despite its already long pastoral activity in the armed forces, has never really been able
 to help on this particular issue. What can imams do about it?

28 **Marat-Khazrat Arslanov**: Concerning *dedovshchina*, I disagree – one shouldn't generalize.
 In some units the situation has improved. I have visited such units where, thanks to the
 Orthodox Church and military leadership, *dedovshchina* no longer exists. For that reason I
 wouldn't say there's been no improvement. Besides which it is well known that although
dedovshchina exists in some places, it doesn't exist everywhere. Concerning our broader
 involvement in the lives of our servicemen-citizens of Russia, I don't know whether we will
 be dealing with this issue or not, but we too bear our share of responsibility - because, I repeat,
 a spiritual person is one who values moral laws, and *dedovshchina* is in contradiction with
 these laws. A person who is religious or spiritual prefers to remain clean and untainted, and
 will act so as to prevent such behavior towards new recruits.

29 It is my feeling that the more spirituality there is among servicemen, the less injustice of this
 sort there will be.

30 **PIPSS.ORG** – How many imams will be appointed to the armed forces and concretely, how
 are they going to work?

31 **Marat-Khazrat Arslanov** : I can't give you any figures, but as for what their functions will
 be, it will start with the oath. The imam will be present at the swearing-in ceremony, when all
 the new recruits take their oath. They will see him and he will meet them. That way they will
 all know him and he will know them. Later on, as we know from experience, probably after
 about six months, these men will begin to come to see him with questions or requests.

32 **PIPSS.ORG** – How do you explain the ruling that there must be 10% of servicemen in a unit
 belonging to a particular confession for a chaplain to be brought in?

33 **Marat-Khazrat Arslanov**: I can't really explain it – there's probably a practical reason.
 Maybe those who put this project in place thought that if there were less than 10% belonging
 to a religion there would be no problems, but with more than 10% there could be. It's difficult
 for me to say. But I think it is a significant step forward. Today 10% and tomorrow perhaps
 no minimum at all – Ideally, even if there were only one serviceman, he would be entitled to
 spiritual support if he needed it.

CANDIDATES TO PERMANENT IMAM POSITIONS

34 **PIPSS.ORG** – How will the army choose permanent imams? Who will select them?

35 **Marat-Khazrat Arslanov**: In fact, there won't be special imams for the units. It has more to
 do with local links. If we take for example the town of Shchelkovo⁸ where I myself am an
 imam – there are two mosques. In this *raion*, there are several units where Muslims serve, and
 as the representative of the Muslim community I have to supervise them – I have to know who
 is who, where and what. In other words I have to visit the units located nearby. In practice,
 we already do that. Also, servicemen come to visit us. On holidays, they are brought to our
 mosques by bus. Of course, all this depends on the commanding officers and on the authorities
 of the *raion*. In the Moscow region, I will definitely say that this practice exists. So it has
 nothing to do with a separate position – the practice already exists locally and will only be
 made official.

36 **PIPSS.ORG** – In your opinion, can imams from other streams of Islam than Sunni Islam be
 appointed to the armed forces? Will the army accept that?

37 **Marat-Khazrat Arslanov**: In fact, this distinction is only for books. In practice there is none.
 Sunni, Shiite – a Muslim is a Muslim. There is no such division. There is a unity in diversity.
 All are Muslims, whatever stream they follow. In Russia this question is not asked, especially
 since in Russia the majority of Muslims are Sunni Muslims.

38 **PIPSS.ORG** – But could the armed forces object to the presence of an imam because of the
 stream he belongs to? I'm thinking of the region of Dagestan, Chechnya, for instance.

39 **Marat-Khazrat Arslanov:** They could – after all, they’re the boss. But if it did happen, there would have to be a good reason for it. An imam is a man who seeks compromise – dialogue. In my experience, I can’t recall that ever having happened. There’s an understanding between ourselves and the army that we are guests, and that we have a task to fulfil.

Notes

1 The Council of Muftis of Russia is an Islamic religious center uniting on a voluntary basis heads of Muslim spiritual boards around the country. It was founded in 1996. Its president is Mufti Sheik Ravil Gainutdin, also president of the Spiritual Board of European Muslims. According to its charter, its aims are “a) organizational consolidation of Russia's Muslim religious unions with a view to joint solution of the most important problems concerning the entire Muslim community in the country; b) coordination of activities and mutual assistance of its member organizations in their relations with institutions of central and local government, organizations representing other religions and international and foreign organizations”. Sources: *Slovar’ Religii narodov sovremennoi Rossii*, Moskva, Respublika, 1999 and *Enciklopediia Islam v sovremennoi Rossii*, Moskva, Algoritm, 2008, p. 41 [E.S.K.’s note].

2 Letters sent by officers to various Muslim bodies, TV programs and medias often mention the fact that Muslim servicemen refuse to wash the floor, stating that the Koran forbids them to do so [E.S.K.’s note].

3 In June 2003, a protocol of cooperation between the Council of Muftis of Russia and the Ground Forces was signed under the slogan “The Muslim – an exemplary defender of the Homeland”. Other cooperation programs have been signed since then [E.S.K.’s note].

4 Cf. Our interview with Sergei Mel’kov in this issue (<http://www.pipss.org/index2410.html>).

5 At that time, by law, clergymen were able to obtain deferrals. Since February 6, 2008, deferrals from the draft for clergymen have been suppressed [E.S.K.’s note].

6 The first Islamic University opened in Moscow in 1999 [E.S.K.’s note].

7 The Federal Law on Freedom of Conscience (23 June 1997) designates Orthodoxy, Islam, Judaism and Buddhism as Russia’s four “traditional” religions [E.S.K.’s note].

8 Located in the Moscow *oblast* [E.S.K.’s note].

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