Salafism as an Ideological and Political Movement in the Muslim Ummah Crimea

This article features those Muslims of Crimea who call themselves Salafis, known as followers of the righteous Caliphs, founders of early Islam. The essence of this Muslim Sunni community is the desire to return to the roots of faith. The article describes Salafis’ role in reviving Islam in the recent history of Crimea, including providing education, mosques, land plots, and social aid for Crimean Tatar returnees after Soviet period deportation.

In Crimea, those who call themselves Salafis are the followers known since the days of righteous Caliphs as “Ahl al-Sunnah wal-Jamaat.” [Arabic] The essence of this Sunni Muslim community is the desire to return to the roots of faith, and a particularly authentic concept is “al-Salaf al-Salih,” that believers consent to be followers of righteous ancestors, the founders of early Islam. Salafis have found their niche in
the Muslim community of Crimea and maintain active positions in Crimean society. They took the initiative in such acute social issues as providing returnees with land for housing, and social assistance for those settling back into their Muslim Crimean Tatar homeland. During the revival of Islam in Crimea, in collaboration with [other] Muslim communities, they provided invaluable assistance organizing Islamic education and constructing mosques. While the community of modern adherents of Salafism in Crimea is not uniform, according to statements of leaders of Islamic associations, key strategic approaches that unite these currents are as follows: advocating broad Islamic education among the masses, use of Islamic values in the development of modern society, and commitment to concepts of a just national state.

When people speak of Crimean Muslims, they frequently mention the Salafis (Wahhabis), often complete with such mythologems as “fundamentalism,” “radicalism,” “untraditional,” “extremist,” and others. It is necessary to present more accurately one those in modern-day Crimea positioning themselves as Salafis, that is, “supporters of the sunnah and in accord” (ahl as-sunnah wal-jamaat). Their aspiration for a return to the roots of the faith from the times of the pious founders of early Islam makes them followers of “the rightly guided [rashidun] Caliphs.” The multiplicity of schools [madhhabs] and various directions (branches) that emerged after the death of the Prophet Muhammad put the Muslim community [ummah] in a perpetual dilemma of internal renewal and return to the initial fundamental doctrines of Islam. One of the first theoreticians of so-called fundamentalism can be considered Ahmad ibn Hanbal (780–855), who founded one of the strictest theological schools in Islam, the Hanbali maddhab. One feature of modern-day Salafism is not only a return to the unshakable doctrines of Islam, but also the use of Islamic ordinances in the social and political life of Muslims. In this framework one can consider modern-day adherents of Salafiya those who call for social justice, strengthening of morals, and preservation of national and religious distinctiveness. Crimean Salafists have their own specifics, associated with the return to the historical motherland of the Crimean Tatar Muslim people. They have experienced serious problems with their resettlement and the revival of their national culture, language, and religion.

It is no secret that outside forces exerted a large influence on the revival of Islam in Crimea. One of the first Arab organizations officially functioning in Crimea was the “As-Suna” charitable foundation from
Saudi Arabia. The assertion that Saudi Arabia has declared Wahhabism its official ideology is inappropriate, inasmuch as the kingdom’s official documents proclaim Islam as the state religion without further interpretation. Nevertheless, Salafist doctrine (what they call the teaching of Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab) enjoys recognition on the part of the [Saudi Arabian] state. The works of this teacher of the faith, mainly dedicated to a defense of strict monotheism, are regularly republished and studied. Modern-day “Salafiya-Wahhabist” Islam in its contemporary form in Saudi Arabia and other countries of the Arabian Peninsula is far removed from many of the “extremes” of the original Wahhabism (Dobaev 2011). For this reason, the terms “Wahhabism” and “radical” have an entirely different meaning in modern-day scholarly circles, among Orientalists and those who study Islam, than they do, for example, in the mass information media.

In conditions of scarcity in Crimea of spiritual literature, of educated imams, and of an effective network for spiritual educational establishments, broad circles of Muslims have become attracted to the ideology of Salafism (Sunni fundamentalism). It provides the answers to many questions that they were unable to obtain from members of their older generation, who knew Islam only at the level of folk customs—urf-adets (Crimean Tatar). Not accepting the principles of so-called traditionalism, adherents of Salafism from the Arab countries became the first preacher-theologians in the milieu of Crimean Muslims. Besides providing humanitarian aid and acquiring prayer halls, in 1997 the Arab organization “As-Suna,” in cooperation with the Crimean Charitable Foundation “Krym 2000,” became the primary proponent and facilitator for the organized hajj [pilgrimage] of Crimean Muslims to Mecca (Saudi Arabia).

Islamic groups calling themselves Salafists began to stand out, not only by the beards of the men or hijabs [head coverings] of the women; being full-fledged members of modern-day Crimean society, basing themselves on the Koran and the sunnah, they acquired sociopolitical positions in society. They appealed to state organs for support in giving last-year high-school seniors the opportunity to perform Friday namāz [prayer] in mosques, in separate education of the sexes, and in enabling documents to have photographs of women with covered heads.

Their political activeness increased since that initial period. For example, on 28 March 2003, about 500 Crimean Tatars demonstrated against the war in Iraq in front of the Supreme Council of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea. They categorically condemned the
actions of the anti-Iraqi coalition and demanded the prompt cessation of the war, and withdrawal of occupation troops from the territory of the Muslim states of Iraq, Afghanistan, Palestine, and Chechnya. They likewise demanded that a Ukrainian battalion leave the [Iraq] conflict zone. At the rally, they condemned the actions of the Mejlis, which had supported the aggressors, and demanded that the Mejlis not make such declarations in the name of the people. A resolution of the rally was adopted, which they dispatched to the Supreme Rada [Ukraine’s parliament] and government of Ukraine (Maidan 2003).

The Salafists also took an active approach to one of the most acute social and political problems of Crimea—endowing the repatriated with parcels of land for dwelling construction. Actively working in this sphere until recently was the civic organization Avded (Return), which has a mighty Islamic wing headed by imam Daniial [Daniel] Ametov. He had won broad popularity among the participants in the “fields of protest” movement, and had become an iconic figure in Crimea. In 2006, Ametov was appointed advisor to the chairman of the Supreme Council of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea. Despite this, on 12 October 2010, Ametov was sentenced to four years of incarceration (the court later reduced the term to three years) on a charge of resisting the police. However, his cause was continued by his followers, who had united under the aegis of a new civic organization, OO Sebat (Perseverance). Sebat members managed to achieve serious mutual understanding with the government of autonomous Crimea regarding the land questions. Sebat leaders officially declared that they would not allow any deviations from the legislation of Ukraine and understandings with the government of Crimea in resolving the land question on the “fields of protest.” Any unlawful actions in resolving the land question, irrespective of the rank and position of the official attempting to commit such actions, would be suppressed by all allowable legal methods without delay (Sebat 2013a).

The change in protest action tactics and the results of the declared legality-observing approach soon brought results. On 27 November 2012, at a solemn gathering of OO Sebat in the IPC-Simferopol press center, participants in the “Petrovskie Vysoty” “field of protest” were handed the first state deeds for rightful ownership to land. Later, Sebat publicly unveiled several more events for handing participants in the “fields of protest,” including Slavs, documents regarding allotment of land parcels. On 13 May 2013, a people’s assembly was organized on the main square of the city of Simferopol, at which the leadership of the
autonomy for the first time publicly gave out state deeds for the right of ownership to land to participants in the Crimean “fields of protest.” The participants in Crimea’s land actions were represented by the civic organization Sebat. In all, 1,053 Crimeans of different nationalities received permission to pursue land-utilization projects at this improvised event. The participants in the land actions unfurled banners saying: “We support the President’s initiatives!” “Crimean Tatars—for peace and stability in Crimea!” and “Peaceful resolution of questions—a guarantee of stability and prosperity!” Prominent were huge posters saying “Sebat! Land! The People!” (Sebat 2013b).

In terms of social projects and Islamic enlightenment, Crimea’s section of the All-Ukraine Association of Civic Organizations Alraid could serve as a graphic example of a modern-day Muslim formation that considers itself to be following the pious founders of early Islam. The activity of this organization in Crimea began in the mid-1990s, the period of the mass return of Crimean Tatars to the motherland, and it coincided with a severe economic crisis in the post-Soviet republics. Tens of thousands of repatriates were without housing, water, qualified medical help, and other elementary conditions. The Islamic organization was able to attract significant financial resources from Arab countries for the drilling of artesian wells, the opening of medical stations, and the rendering of one-time assistance to the gravely ill, orphans, and invalids. The association established interactions with Muslim congregations, helping them in the construction and outfitting of mosques. Taking into account the wary attitude toward Islam as a whole and toward their organization in particular, the Alraid association became a leader in conducting public enlightenment events in the city of Simferopol: seminars, roundtables, scientific-and-practical conferences dedicated to familiarization with the religion of Islam, moral-and-spiritual upbringing of youth, intercivilizational dialogue, and more. The leading participants in these events were scholars, religious figures, and representatives of state power organs.

**Conclusion**

Modern-day Salafism in Crimea is not homogeneous. It includes various segments in the form of orthodox groups with a strict regimentation of everyday and sociopolitical life (called by some people Wahhabists); a small vigilant group of takfiris (implacable fighters against “faith-backsliders in Islam”); Tablighi-Jamaat (controversial Islamic “evange-
lists”); Caliphate proponents (Islamic romantics who dream about the rebirth of a theocratic state); and others. Relations between these groups have been far from idyllic. In recent years, they not infrequently exchange public “admonitions” and unmaskings, accusing one another of deviating from Islamic values, hypocrisy, and sectarianism.

At the same time, proceeding from statements by these Islamic associations, one can determine that main strategic positions could unite the indicated currents. They advocate broad Islamic enlightenment among the masses, use of Islamic values on the path of development of modern-day society, and adherence to conceptions of a fair modern state. The Salafists constantly declare that their activities remain within the framework of the Constitution and Ukraine’s legislation, ruling out violence as a means for achieving any goal. It remains to be hoped that despite disagreements, adherents of Salafism will contribute to attainment of a modern-day healthy Muslim community that possesses high moral standards. This will go a long way toward dismantling the myths and stereotypes around this religious current and will substantially strengthen interconfessional mutual understanding in the Crimean community.

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