



**THE QUR'AN FOR SOVIET CITIZENS: THE RHETORIC OF PROGRESS  
IN THE THEOLOGICAL WORKS OF 'ABD AL-BARI ISAEV**

***Alfrid Bustanov***

European University at St Petersburg  
6/1A Gagarinskaya Str., St Petersburg, Russia  
University of Amsterdam  
48 Kloveniersburgwal, Amsterdam, the Netherlands  
alf\_b@list.ru

**Abstract:** This article deals with the rhetoric of progress in the works of 'Abd al-Bari Isaev, a Muslim authority of the late Socialist era. These texts demonstrate a peculiar combination of a thorough study of the Qur'an and of the Prophetic traditions on the one hand, and a fascination with the success of Soviet cosmonautics and science on the other. Traditional Islamic subjects of Qur'an commentaries merged with a popular genre of Friday sermon and became a prominent field for the diffusion of Muslim and Soviet ideologies. Still, even Sovietised (and partly Russified) examples of Islamic theology of the Stagnation period were never published and broadly disseminated. Such censorship clearly demonstrated the borders of cultural and ideological pluralism in the society of late Socialism.

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## **The Qur'an for Soviet Citizens: The Rhetoric of Progress in the Theological Works of 'Abd al-Bari Isaev**

This article deals with the rhetoric of progress in the works of 'Abd al-Bari Isaev, a Muslim authority of the late Socialist era. These texts demonstrate a peculiar combination of a thorough study of the Qur'an and of the Prophetic traditions on the one hand, and a fascination with the success of Soviet cosmonautics and science on the other. Traditional Islamic subjects of Qur'an commentaries merged with a popular genre of Friday sermon and became a prominent field for the diffusion of Muslim and Soviet ideologies. Still, even Sovietised (and partly Russified) examples of Islamic theology of the Stagnation period were never published and broadly disseminated. Such censorship clearly demonstrated the borders of cultural and ideological pluralism in the society of late Socialism.

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In my research on Islamic literature in Russia I am mostly concerned with the questions of what the forms of 'Islamic' interaction between educated Muslims and a modernising state were, and how the individual and his / her understanding of religion in Soviet society modulated over time, including the period of stagnation. I have been orientated towards material from private family archives, as opposed to the official narratives, which often relay documents created by the state.<sup>1</sup> The materials with which I have to work in private archives take in the entire twentieth century, but those of my discoveries which will be discussed here relate to the Brezhnev period. The sources that I bring forward in this article clearly demonstrate the long-term continuity of theological discourses that mutated under the influence of Soviet modernisation. I shall in particular attempt to illustrate what diversity looked like during Brezhnev's stagnation, and how one could be a Muslim intellectual during the late Soviet period, when persecution of religious believers was less intense than in the 1930s or the Khrushchev era, but still a significant social

**Alfrid Bustanov**

European University  
at St Petersburg  
6/1A Gagarinskaya Str.,  
St Petersburg, Russia /  
University of Amsterdam  
48 Kloveniersburgwal, Amsterdam,  
The Netherlands  
alf\_b@list.ru

<sup>1</sup> Existing research on Soviet Islam and modernity includes [Khalid 2007; Tasar 2017; Kalinovsky 2018].

force. In addition, I am especially interested in the evolution and development of social networks. Educated Muslims in the Soviet Union had lasting contacts with each other, within which they cultivated quite definite views on the place of Islam in society. My article therefore complements work on the development of horizontal social relations in the post-Stalin era, including the article by Ekaterina Melnikova in the present cluster.

In this article on the role of the Qur'an for Muslims of the Soviet period I would like to make the following general observation, which may be of interest not only to specialists on Islam: *the period of stagnation was a time when the followers of a logocentric reading of the Islamic tradition (that is, a restriction of the basic sources immediately to the foundations of the religion in the form of the Qur'an and the Sunnah) armed themselves with Soviet rhetoric about modernisation and progress.* However, whereas the theologians themselves consciously tried to transpose the Qur'an in a Soviet key, the officials at the Council for Religious Affairs adhered strictly to the limits of what was permitted and would not allow Islamic literature to be printed for wide circulation even in such a sovietised form. A belief in the possibility that a legal Islamic discourse could exist in the Soviet Union collided with the restrictions of anti-religious propaganda, which led the last generation of Islamic theologians who had been educated before the revolution to a fatal frustration.

One often finds in the literature the assertion that Islamic theological thought simply ceased to exist in the Soviet Union because of repressions and a policy of strict state atheism [Usmanova, Minnullin, Mukhametshin 2009]. It would be stupid to deny those tragic losses borne by Islamic culture in our country in the years of persecution [Kemper 2017], but I nevertheless maintain that theological traditions were not completely destroyed in the Soviet Union, but most often took on new forms. For example, it is, in my opinion, precisely the peculiar religious situation in the country that promoted the rise in popularity of such genres of Islamic literature as Friday sermons (*wāḡaz*) and private letters (*khat*) containing detailed examinations of religious questions. Other genres continued to flow in the same direction as they had before the revolution: this concerns religious poetry [Bustanov 2017] and particularly the genre of translations (*tārjumā*) and commentaries on the Qur'an (*tāfsir*). By all accounts the shift towards discussing the Qur'an in vernacular languages took place in the period from 1910 to the 1920s, when a whole series of eminent theologians — Musa Bigeev (1873–1959), Ziya Kamali (1873–1942), Burhan al-Din Sharaf (1883–1942) and Sungatulla Bikbulatov (1886–1954) — made translations of the Qur'an into Volga Turkic, or, to put it more simply, literary Tatar [Batyraev

2008; Saetov 2017]. This vernacularisation of the holy word coincides chronologically with the process taking place at the same time in the Ottoman Empire [Wilson 2014], and is rooted in the early debates between the Muslims of the first centuries of Islam, when a number of theologians permitted the recitation of the Qur'an in native languages within the framework of obligatory prayers (the language in question at that time most often being Persian) [Zadeh 2012].

Later, when the question of the diffusion of Islam among the broad masses of the people was largely solved, such a liberal attitude towards the language of the Qur'an was considered marginal. A return to the idea of translation into native languages was caused by the growth of nationalism and the urge towards democratisation, both of literary Tatar itself, which was to be cleansed of borrowings and made closer to ordinary people, and of the language of the Holy Book. During the first third of the twentieth century Islamic theologians worked at creating an accessible text with the contents of Islam's chief book that could be read and understood by anyone with a minimal education. Through a combination of circumstances all the translations of the Qur'an that were made in the last years of the Russian Empire and the early Soviet period were either forgotten or lost during the time of repression — in any case, they did not reach their audience and did not accomplish their task.

### **Translation of the Qur'an as a critique of Islam**

The 'post-Stalin' period with its institutionalisation of official Islam in the form of muftiates [Tasar 2017] evidently provided the impulse to continue work on translating the Qur'an for the needs of Soviet Muslims. I know of two complete translations of the Qur'an made in the 1960s and 70s. For information about one of them I am obliged to Mansur Gazimzyanov, who discovered a petition from Mutygulla Sungatullin (b. 1891), a pensioner from the town of Nurlat, to the plenipotentiary for religious affairs in the State Archive of the Republic of Tatarstan. The pensioner states in his letter of 1967 that he has translated the entire Qur'an into Tatar and wants to publish it. The authorities did not apparently make any objection, but recommended him to apply to the Spiritual Directorate of the Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan in Tashkent, where they ought to have the Arabic type for printing it. All trace of this work is lost somewhere in Tashkent. This is what Sungatullin wrote<sup>1</sup>:

<sup>1</sup> The text is written in extremely awkward style, which the translation attempts to capture [Eds.].

To: Moscow, the Kremlin  
 The President of the Council of Ministers  
 Comrade A. N. Kosygin

From: Sungatullin M. B., pensioner, b. 1891  
 address: TASSR, Nurlat — Oktyabrskiy  
 19 Zapadnaya Str.

*Application*

*I am applying to you for the second time and urgently request that you fulfil my request for the publication of the Qur'an.*

*I inform you that I have considered it my duty to carry out this work in the line of religion, i.e. the refutation and translation of the Qur'an from Arabic into Tatar, on which I have worked for forty years (from 1920 to 1967), from the time when I was serving in the police force.*

*Guided by the words of V. I. Lenin, that 'religion intoxicates the masses of the people', I read many religious books in search of the truthfulness of the quotation from V. I. Lenin. Having read the Qur'an 138 times, I convinced myself of the truthfulness of V. I. Lenin, that the religion that exists before the transitional period and after the transitional period from capitalism to socialism was intended by the upper echelons of the bourgeoisie to profit from, deceive, and intoxicate the masses of the people. The Qur'an has been translated from Arabic into many national languages in a distorted form. But I, having served in the two Patriotic Wars and being in the police service at the time of the Civil War tirelessly (in secret from the elite of the religious authorities) decided to occupy myself with the translation and refutation of distorted points of the Qur'an, published in 1312 in Baghdad. According to the Arabic Qur'an of 1312 one single faith is written for all nationalities and peoples of the globe, but the mullahs of past centuries in the interest of deceiving the masses of the people divided the written faith of the Arabic Qur'an into many parts, which is a falsehood. My modest labour, a translation of the Qur'an from the Arabic into Tatar with a refutation of 146 pages, written with my own hand, has been reviewed as follows:*

*at the direction of L. N.<sup>1</sup> Brezhnev, Secretary of the Central Committee of the CPSU (by whom I was received on 24 January 1967) I was received by Comrade Saidbaev, Chairman of the Council for Religious Affairs, on the Smolensk Boulevard in Moscow, and he, approving my manuscript sent it to the clergy of the Uzbek SSR in Tashkent.*

*From 10 May 1967 to 31 July 1967 all the mullahs of the working mosques in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, having read my manuscript of the refutation and translation from Arabic into Tatar (of the Qur'an)*

<sup>1</sup> Sic. Brezhnev's patronymic was actually Ilyich [Eds.].

*were struck with the falsity of the existing religion, and were also grateful, that my manuscript with the refutation in the translation demonstrates the fact that<sup>1</sup> for all nationalities and people one single faith is written according to the Qur'an published in 1312 in Baghdad.*

*I ask that you give permission for my manuscript to be published.*

*I ask you to fulfil my request. With my request to you,*

*Sungatullin M. B.*

*TASSR, Nurlat — Oktyabrskiy*

*19 Zapadnaya Str. [GART, f. R-873, op. 1, d. 25, f. 25].*

The language of this document deserves special attention. In his application to the organs of the state Sungatullin stresses the anti-religious character of his work (admittedly, with no access to the original of the 'refuting translation' it is hard to verify this statement). Thereby the author specially uses the language of Soviet ideology so that his work should see the light of day. Insisting upon his many years' service to the Soviet state (a retired militiaman and veteran of two wars), Sungatullin says that it is his duty to explain the Qur'an correctly and to call the people to the true understanding of religion. The author's urgings that the Islamic tradition contains many mistakes and incorrect interpretations, the purpose of which is to deceive ordinary people and enrich the bourgeoisie, look perfectly Marxist. This sort of Marxist rhetoric is derived from the discussions of the 1920s and 30s concerning the class character of Muslim society. These discussions had a tragic ending: Islam was proclaimed the religion of the feudal lords and an instrument for the oppression of the working masses, which provided a legitimate foundation for the repression of Islamic institutions and many religious activists [Kemper 2009].

At the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, ideas about the purification of religion from inventions and innovations (once again) gained wide currency in Muslim countries [Baldauf 2001; Shikhaliev 2017]. Basically, texts with this tendency are orientated almost exclusively on the Qur'an and on the *hadith* of the Prophet, and aim to criticise practices which are supposed to deviate from 'true Islam'. In Sungatullin's narrative, the truth or religion is verified against the text of a printed Qur'an published in the Middle East. The author thinks that it is possible to understand the true meaning of Islam by refuting 'people's inventions'. Unfortunately, Sungatullin's translation, which, judging by his letter, would be very interesting for scholarship, was not published and the manuscript remains undiscovered. However, the positioning of

<sup>1</sup> Literally: 'is the fact that' [Eds.].

translations of the Qur'an into Tatar as anti-religious literature was embodied in the book *The Secrets of the Qur'an (Kor'an serläre)* by the Tatar writer Garif Gubaidullin (1907–1983), also published in 1967 [Gobäy 1967], and which went through two more editions with a print-run of up to 30,000. The book may have been based on detailed research by someone, since it contains quotations from the Qur'an in Arabic and detailed criticism of them. At the same time, there is nothing to show that Garif Gubaidullin had any theological education.

Not long ago I succeeded in discovering a very copious refutation (*raddiya*) of Garif Gubaidullin's anti-religious pamphlet, compiled in 1969 by Fath al-Qadir Babich (1890–1973), the elder brother of the well-known poet Shaikhzada Babich. Fath al-Qadir Babich had studied at the Galiya madrasa in Ufa, but afterwards, probably during Stalin's repressions of the 1930s, he was forced to move to Central Asia. He wrote the work in Khujand and sent it, just before his death, to Imam Abbas Bibarsov (1937–2012) of the Ufa Mosque, in whose personal library the only manuscript of this work was preserved. The peculiarity of Babich's work — a sort of encyclopaedia of Islamic culture in Russia — is that it is a combination of polemic with the atheists, traditional ethical poetry and meditations on the attributes of Allah, and also arguments drawn from the contemporary natural sciences. The chief message of Babich's work is that Islam does not contradict communist ideology or progressive science, but, on the contrary, is the foundation of an ideal social order. In this sense Babich comes out in support of collaboration between the Soviet modernisation project and Islamic tradition, but these ideas remained marginal, as his book was not published and can hardly have been read by anyone (see Ill. 1).

### **An Islamic theologian in the Soviet Union**

'Abd al-Bari Isaev (1907–1983), another translator of the Qur'an into Tatar, had better fortune than the others [Bostanov 2017] (Ill. 2). Born in a little village in Bashkiria, by the age of twelve Isaev had learnt the whole Qur'an, and thereafter he put great effort into studying every aspect of it. I see the intellectual pedigree of Isaev and his views like this. He was greatly influenced by his teacher Ziya Kamali (the author of a lost two-volume translation of the Qur'an) [Kamali 2010], who had been educated at the 'Uthmaniyah madrasa in Ufa, and then at the celebrated Al-Azhar University in Cairo, had been a pupil of Muhammad Abduh, one of the greatest ideologists of Islamic reformism and the author of an extensive Arabic commentary on the Qur'an.<sup>1</sup> It was his teachers' example that moved

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<sup>1</sup> The twelve volumes of Muhammad Abduh's *Tafsir Manar* were published in 1927.

'Abd al-Bari Isaev to spend all his life in Qur'anic studies. In this way, Isaev's interests combined a focus on the text of the Qur'an with the attitude of those reformers who sought to make Islam 'progressive'. The reformers' social network was transnational, and partly thanks to this it survived the repressions in Russia. Moreover, while living in Ufa and Leningrad Isaev was successfully integrated into Russian society, where he looked perfectly authentic: a decorated war veteran who was not afraid of hard physical work. At the same time, Isaev's naïve sincerity and conviction that it was possible to live 'by the Qur'an' in the Soviet Union was in contradiction with reality, where the ability to articulate Soviet discourse was, in a political sense, more highly valued than skill in interpreting the Qur'an. In other words, the social diversity of the period of stagnation had evident limits and red lines, which not even the most sincere devotees of the Soviet way of life were allowed to pass.

Isaev was twice forced out of Soviet Islamic institutions. In 1967 he was compelled to resign the post of imam, after repairing the Leningrad mosque and putting it in order. The reason was a conflict with a number of local provocateurs, behind whom was the religious affairs executive. After a long gap in his service as an imam, Isaev reached the peak of his career in 1975 when he became mufti of the Spiritual Directorate of the Muslims of European Russia and Siberia in Ufa. In this post he hoped, in spite of atheist propaganda, to undertake extensive educational work and publish a whole series of theological works and a collection of Friday sermons.

It is easy to see the degree to which Isaev idealised Soviet diversity and the opportunities it offered from an exchange of fire between him and a certain Khanifa Zamaleeva. In 1977 Zamaleeva wrote a denunciatory letter to the mufti, Isaev, accusing him of embezzlement and immorality. It was obvious that the purpose of the letter was to discredit the mufti, and for that reason a copy was sent to the relevant organs. Isaev's reaction was quite typical: instead of replying in the same tone or taking administrative measures,<sup>1</sup> he wrote a letter of many pages with quotations from the Qur'an and the *hadith*, refuting Zamaleeva's accusations point by point. In particular, he wrote:

*Khanifa, of course I do not know you, we are not acquainted, and so you cannot know anything about me. Nevertheless I am astonished at your stupidity, and although I have no time to do so, I felt it necessary to write to you, since a mufti is obliged to show people the right path. Allah says that every Muslim is obliged to help a sinner to find the right path. I shall answer for this on the Day of Judgment and be rewarded if I have been able to explain everything correctly. Nevertheless Allah*

<sup>1</sup> I.e. appealing to the authorities to sort the situation out [Eds.].



*also explains that there are certain stupid people who will still not find the truth.*<sup>1</sup>

Such an approach to the resolution of conflict did not have much hope of success in late-Soviet society. Therefore the consequences are clear: not long before his unexpected retirement Isaev sent all his fundamental works, including his translations of the Qur'an, the *hadiths* and a collection of sermons, to the supervisory organs with the request that they should be published.<sup>2</sup> This sort of activity was not to the authorities' taste, and in 1980 Isaev had to resign the post of mufti.

### The Qur'an in Isaev's theological works

'Abd al-Bari Isaev's personal archive contains an impressive quantity of manuscript works, which allow one to form an opinion about his creative laboratory and his many years' study of the Qur'an. Almost all Isaev's written legacy is connected with the Qur'an in one way or another, even his personal letters to his friends are full of quotations from the Qur'an and their interpretation. The first drafts of works on the Qur'an evidently go back to the 1950s, when Isaev was already serving as an imam in Leningrad, but it may be that he began the work while he was still in Ufa (1947–56). His method of preparing his weekly sermons was to prepare separate cards with *ayat* from the Qur'an. Some of these cards already bore his first attempts at translation. Then Isaev proceeded to a systematic classification of the *ayat* and their translation into Tatar. Based on these cards and classifications, Isaev wrote several works dealing with the prophets, the religions of the Christians and Jews, and the order of the cosmos according to information from the Qur'an. All these materials were tried out on Fridays at the mosque. In that way the genre of the

<sup>1</sup> 'Khänifä, älbättä, min sezne belmim. Seznen belän aralashqan keshe tügel. Shulay uq beznen khälebezdän ber tienlek kenä khäberegez dä yuq, läkin seznen akhmaqlygygzga isem kitä. Khäm waqitim bulmasa da, oshbu yazunı sezgä yazunı zur burichlarimnan saniim, chünki 'min dinle' dip yuldan chiqqan keshelärne müfti bulu münäsäbäte belän yulga tüsherü büek khäm tieshe burichlardan. Allah jällä-jälälä Qur'an-i Kärimdä khärber adashqan keshene yulga tüsherü khär mu'minneng burichı itep quygan, chünki ägär dä min sezgä anglatmasam, moning üchen min Allah khozurında jawap birächäkmen. Läkin bäg'ze ber mäg'näsez keshelärne yulga Allah tüshermäs, bändä tüsherä almaunı khäm achıq beldeğän' [Isaev family archive, op. 6, d. 4, f. 1a].

<sup>2</sup> From a letter to Muhammad-Parsa Akhatov, 17 February 1977: 'I have compiled a collection of *hadith* in accordance with the spirit of the age and, having translated them into Russian and Tatar, have sent them [to the state]. It is a small book. I sent it last year. I still haven't had an answer. That's how things are, my friend. I also wrote a large book on the *mawlid* in Tatar. I also have a book of 53 sermons for a whole year. They are all unpublished, I sent them to the state with translations. My children are keeping the Tatar texts.' ['Moning songında khädis än-näbävia digän ber zamanga muäfiq khädislärlä kitabı yazıp, ruscha khäm tatarcha tärmä belän tapshırgan idem. Zur tügel genä. Uzgan el tapshırdım. Bügen dä jawap yuq äle. Menä dustım, minem äkhwälem shular. Moning songında mäüliäd än-näbi türında saf tatar telendä king räveshtä yazgan kitabım bar. Moning songında ber el echendä bula torgan 53 jomga khosusiy khutbälek kitabım bar. Läkin bolar basılmıy, khär qaysı ruschalashtırıp, khükümätkä tapshırılğan. Millät telendä balalar kulında da saklana'] [F. Akhatova's personal archive]. The originals of the letters are kept by Akhatov's daughter, Fagima, in Kiev. My sincere thanks to Denis Brilev for obtaining copies for me.

sermon is in many ways the matrix for Muslim theological thought. The next step was to make a complete translation of the Qur'an into Tatar and a version of that in Russian. This is how 'Abd al-Bari Isaev described his work in a letter of 1 April 1977 to his schoolfriend Muhammad-Parsa Akhatov from Kiev:

*I hoped to complete my current business in three months. It consists of the following, it is no secret: over the past twelve or thirteen years I have been translating the Qur'an in two forms: continuously and thematically. Now I am translating it into Russian in the hope of publication. The translation is both in Arabic letters and in modern Tatar letters. Most of my time is spent on this work. What will come of this. Besides, I have compiled a collection of the hadith of the Prophet. I have translated it too. What will come of this.<sup>1</sup>*

The only full copy of the translation of the Qur'an into Tatar has survived in the possession of 'Abd al-Bari Isaev's daughter Fia Gabelbarievna, who lives in Dushanbe (Ill. 3, 4). The manuscript consists of 1289 A4 leaves [Isaev 2018]. Since the author wanted to appeal to as wide an audience as possible, this work was written in Tatar both in Arabic script and in Cyrillic, with which Isaev was poorly acquainted. Therefore, as well as some peculiarities of the Mişār dialect, there are places in the text of the manuscript which, from the point of view of modern literary Tatar, could be called stylistic or orthographic mistakes. These clashes can be explained by the fact that Isaev had received his education and wrote his texts in a tradition which was different from that of secular Tatar literature of the post-war period.

In parallel with this work 'Abd al-Bari Isaev made several versions of his most important work, *Islam Dine — The Religion of Islam*, which was intended to explain the philosophy of Islam to Soviet Muslims and planned to be published in 1980.<sup>2</sup> Judging by Isaev's drafts, he saw his work as a continuation of two works by his predecessors in the post of mufti at Ufa: that by 'Abd al-Rahman Rasuli, also called *Islam dine* (1945), and Shakir Khäyaletdinov's *Islam gäibadäte* (1958).<sup>3</sup> While Isaev translated the text of the Qur'an

<sup>1</sup> 'Bäg'dä, bu khällärdä dustim min ber üch aylardan tämam alip bara torgan khezmätemne eshläp betärmen dip ümettä idem. Khezmätem shul khäzer inde, yasheren tügel. Min shul 12–13 ellar Qur'an täfsir ittem, ike formada: berse tärtip belän, berse temalar belän (tematicheski). Khäzerdä shunı ruscha tärmäm itep yatam, bälki bastırılar digän ümet belän. Tärmäm garäp khärefe belän dä eshlände khäm khäzerge ruscha tatar khäref belän dä eshlände. Menä shul khezmätkä künneng küp waqiti uzdırıla. Nichek bulip chigar. Annan song äkhädis än-näbäviya ber isbornik yazgan idem. Anı khäm tärmäm ittem. Nichek bulip chigar' [F. Akhatova's personal archive].

<sup>2</sup> The first copy of the work belongs, judging by the palaeography, to the 1950s and was probably begun in Ufa. Two other copies were made in Leningrad, in 'Abd al-Bari Isaev's last years. I rely on the last copy, dated 1983, which is in the Isaev family archive [Isaev family archive, op. 1, d. 1, f. 246].

<sup>3</sup> The autograph of a planned second edition of Shakir Khäyaletdinov's book is preserved in 'Abd al-Bari Isaev's archive. Mufti Riza Fakhretdinov in the 1920s also authored a huge work with the same title,

relying on Muhammad Abduh's *tafsir*, *Islam dine* is full of references to his teacher Ziya Kamali. In this way we see intellectual continuity in the years of Brezhnev's stagnation, a direct appeal to pre-revolutionary ideas and their transformation in new conditions. This circumstance significantly enlarges the chronological limits within which we are accustomed to speak of jadidism, or 'Islamic reform': usually 1938 serves as a closing date [Khalid 2015]. At the same time this blurring of the chronology raises significant questions about the usefulness of discussing jihadism as an independent socio-cultural phenomenon [DeWeese 2016; Bustanov, Dorodnykh 2017].

It should be said that Isaev had a very critical attitude towards Russian translations of the Qur'an and the missionary-orientalist tradition of studying the chief text of Islam. This is what he writes in *Islam dine*:

*The translations of the Qur'an are all dreadful, they are obvious enemies of Islam. What is particularly dreadful is that children nowadays can only read Cyrillic and in Russian. How can anyone understand the truth of Islam after reading Sablukov's<sup>1</sup> Russian translation of the Qur'an? His translation is full of mistakes, inaccuracies and lies about Islam from beginning to end. Kazimirski's<sup>2</sup> translation is just the same. As for Krachkovsky,<sup>3</sup> he is certainly a real expert in the Arabic language, but that is not enough to translate the Qur'an and understand the precepts of Allah. For that you need to be an Islamic scholar.<sup>4</sup>*

What is important here, of course, is not that Isaev is unhappy with the russification of Islam — that process would not become evident until a couple of decades later [Bustanov, Kemper 2012]. Rather, in his criticism of the Russian translations of the Qur'an, Isaev denies Soviet oriental studies the right to have an authoritative opinion about Islam. In Isaev's words, the world is full of mistaken judgments about

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but it remained unpublished and 'Abd al-Bari Isaev does not demonstrate familiarity with this manuscript.

- <sup>1</sup> G. S. Sablukov (1803–1880), lecturer at the Kazan Spiritual Academy and the author of a translation of the Qur'an into Russian [Koran 1877].
- <sup>2</sup> Albert Kazimirski (1808–1887), a French orientalist, the author of a translation of the Qur'an into French (1840), which was afterwards several times published in Russian (translated from French by K. Nikolaev).
- <sup>3</sup> Academician I. Yu. Krachkovsky (1883–1951), an outstanding Soviet Arabist; his draft translation of the Qur'an into Russian was published after his death thanks to V. I. Belyaev and P. A. Gryaznevich in 1963 [Koran 1963].
- <sup>4</sup> 'Qur'an pervedoları da kübese kurqinich, islam dineneng qatgıy doshmannarıdır. Bigrāk qurqinich: khäzerge waqıtta balalar rus khärefe belän ruscha gına uqıy belälär. Shulay bulgach, Sablukov tarafınan ruscha tärjemä itelgän Qur'anne uqıp, shunnan mä'lumät alğan keshe nichek itep islam dineneng haqıyqaten döres anglap döres hökem itä alsın?! Sablukovning pervedöi bashtan azagına qadär menglärchä khata, boziq, islam dinenä pichraqlıq tutirilgan. Shulay uq Kazimirskii pervedöi da khata, iftira', istihzadır. Inde Krachkovskii pervedo bulsa, döres, ul — garäp telen chin belüche, läkin Qur'anne tärjemä itü öchen tel belü genä jitmider. Tel belü berlän genä Allahning hökemen döres anglap bulmıyder. Qur'anne döres anglau öchen islam dinne tämam beluche bulu läzender' [Isaev family archive, op. 1, d. 1, ff. 4a–5b].

Islam because of the incompetence of the authors of countless books, and only by turning to the commentaries on the Qur'an can one elucidate the 'true' content of the Islamic religion. For example, this is what Isaev writes about a particular instance in Sablukov's translation.

*In Sablukov's translation the verse سَبْعَ سَمَوَاتٍ طِبَاقًا is translated as 'Tot, kto sotvoril sem nebes, postaviv odno nad drugimi svodami' ('He who created the seven heavens, (placing) one above the next like vaults'), which is a redaction. The correct translation is: 'Allah created seven planets, covering one with another', that is, [Allah] informs us, that the planets can occlude each other, and that each has its own orbit.'*<sup>1</sup>

This approach and his criticism of non-Islamic interpreters of the Qur'an (for instance, Christian missionaries — of whom, of course, there were none in Brezhnev's Ufa or Leningrad) are traditional elements in Isaev's discourse, rooted in the rich literary tradition of theological polemic between Muslims and Christians in the Middle East and in Imperial Russia [Geraci 2001; Ryad 2009].

At the same time, it is striking that Isaev's texts, which are intended to demonstrate a 'true' and 'pure' Islam, are full of references to the Soviet era of space exploration. It is not surprising that the vocabulary connected with this aspect is entirely borrowed from Russian, although in Arabic script. For example, the word used in the Qur'an to denote the heavens, *samawat* (pl. of *sama*) is always translated by Isaev not as the neutral *kük* (because, as he explains, *kük* refers to empty space, the cosmos as such), but as *planeta*, and moreover these planets move along their orbits — in the Qur'an this is *tabaqa*, literally 'layers, series'. In this conviction Isaev refers directly to the opinion of his teacher Ziya Kamali.<sup>2</sup> In practice, what we are dealing with is

<sup>1</sup> 'Sablukovning سَبْعَ سَمَوَاتٍ طِبَاقًا digän ayatneng täjremäse: "Tot, kto sotvoril sem nebes, postaviv odno nad drugimi svodami" ("He who created seven heavens, (placing) one above the next like vaults"). Bigräk istihza' belän täjremä itkän, shul täjremä itkän, shul täjremäne kire tatarçhaga täjremä itsäk: "Tege, kem yarattı jide küklärne bere östenä bersen kupollarga kuydı." Haqqıqı täjremä: "Ul Allah jide planetanı bere berenä örtep yarattı" yagnı härqaysı planeta bere-berennän örtelgän, härqaysınıng chiklängän orbitası barlıgın belderde' [Isaev family archive, op. 1, d. 1, f. 35b].

<sup>2</sup> 'Our late teacher Ziya al-Din al-Kamali told us in a lesson, that after studying various books on the philology and history of the Arabic language, namely the Nihaya of ibn al-Athir, Al-Durr Al-Manthur by al-Suyuti, and Al-Mufradat fi Gharib al-Qur'an by Isfahani, he found the most correct meanings for the words مطابقة طباق: majority, society, group. For example: جاننا طبق من الناس. In addition, it is used to denote distant places, as in the hadith تقطع الأرباب و توصل الأطلاق. And also to denote changes of condition. In the words of 'Umar b. al-'As (كنت على اطلاق ثلاث) "I was in three historical conditions" it is used in the sense of a transition from one condition to another.' [Märhüm ostaz Ziya al-Din al-Kämali khäzrätläre bu türida härtörle lögät kitapları qarap, ya'ni Ibn al-Äsirning nihayeh Suyutiniñ durr al-manthur, Isfahanineng mufradat qamūs, مفردات القرآن wä bashqar tarikh äl-lügateligaräbiyya مطابقة طباق süzlärne tiksherep tübändägelärne taptım dip däres birgän ide: küpchelek, jämägat', törkem mägnäsändä من الناس جاننا طبق kebi. Däki dä eraq wä ozaq urınnarga da äyteläder من الناس جاننا طبق kebi. Däki dä eraq wä ozaq urınnarga da äyteläder. Tarikh khäl üzgäresh mägnäsändä. Gomär b. äl-Gasniñ (كنت على اطلاق ثلاث) "Üch törle khällärdä buldım" ber khäldän ikenche khälgä küchi mägnäsändä'] [Isaev family archive, op. 1, d. 1, f. 25a].

the genre of scientific commentary on the Qur'an (*tafsir 'ilmi*), common in the twentieth century, which aims to demonstrate that the information in the Qur'an is 'scientific' and that there is nothing to contradict scientific progress [Riexinger 2011].

Isaev was particularly occupied with the question of how the cosmos is organised. One section of his work is called 'Can you go to the moon? What is the moon made of? Is there life there? According to the Qur'an, is the moon a planet?' On many pages of his work *Islam dine* he gives quotations from the Qur'an and the *hadith* which potentially deal with the cosmic architecture, and his treatment of these passages is clearly influenced by the successes of Soviet space exploration. This 'natural science' approach to his treatment of the Qur'an is also connected with Isaev's active use of the works of European scientists to supplement the classical commentaries on the Qur'an. He thus repeats the orientalist motif of the decline of civilisation in the Islamic East: Muslims are not using the wisdom of the Qur'an, and therefore the Europeans are far ahead of them in technological progress. It is only necessary to understand the Qur'an correctly for all those truths that have been revealed to the Europeans to be accessible to Muslims too. This vision repeats almost exactly the approach suggested by Islamic writers at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries in the Middle East and the Russian Empire: turn to the Qur'an and borrow technology from the Europeans [Khalid 1998]. This coincidence of views is not surprising, as Isaev was the direct heir to this intellectual tradition. However, in the Soviet Union a turning to religion was never associated with progress. This was the irresolvable contradiction in Isaev's work: his ideas, inherited from a pre-revolutionary tradition, looked archaic in the conditions of Brezhnev's stagnation, though they were quite in harmony with contemporary theological tendencies in the Middle East. Islam in the USSR was not associated with progress, however hard Isaev tried to prove the reverse.

In his theological works, Isaev demonstrated that the particular nuances of Islamic law could be interpreted in a spirit that would be acceptable to Soviet citizens. The cult of labour typical of Soviet society manifests itself in Isaev's explanations of the possibilities for making up for missed prayers. Answering the question of whether daily prayers may be omitted in a letter to his friend Muhammad-Parsa Akhatov, Isaev draws a distinction between workers and leisured people. Idle people and pensioners, since they are enjoying a deserved rest (the Qur'anic phrase *فَإِذَا أَمِنْتُمْ* literally means 'when you will be in safety' — 2:239), must say their prayers at the proper time. But those who are at work may not only pray at a time that suits them, but even change the very form of the daily prayers: pray while standing, while walking or even mentally, because the purpose of prayer is *tazkiyat al-nafs*, i.e. the purification of the soul from unclean

works and thoughts.<sup>1</sup> This obviously unorthodox opinion about Muslims' ritual practices clearly arises from the need to take Soviet realities into account and at the same time try to preserve at least some forms of regular prayer. Moreover, Isaev builds even this sort of compromise on the foundation of Qur'anic exegesis and denies outright the possibility of abandoning prayer altogether: that way leads to hypocrisy and complete unbelief (*kufir*).

### Conclusion

Isaev's case shows with great clarity that the sovietisation of the Islamic discourse did not come into contradiction with the severity of the demonstrative basis of theological constructions: all his interpretations are founded on the Qur'an, the *hadith* and references to theologians who were close to him in spirit. Moreover, in some cases Isaev displays a severity which is incompatible with Soviet legislation: to a question from one of his comrades about what should be done with a thief, he answered with a quotation from the Qur'an about the cutting off of his / her hand, albeit without a translation, evidently allowing freedom of interpretation.<sup>2</sup> This does not of course mean that they started cutting thieves' hands off in Kiev, where Isaev's letter was sent (such an idea would not even be permitted by the legal *sharia* requirements for proof of the fact of theft). But there is an evident ambivalence towards the sovietisation of Islam here, and it is produced by a remarkable mixture of Qur'anic exegesis, the successes of Soviet space exploration and rhetoric about the reform of Islamic society.

Using the vocabulary of Soviet scientific discourse, Ziya Kamali's immediate disciples tried to bring Islamic philosophy, as they understood it, closer to the social realities of Brezhnev's time.

<sup>1</sup> 'Abandoning prayer: not to perform prayers without reason is a sign of polytheism or even unbelief. The obligation of prayer is never taken away from a Muslim. Therefore prayer must be performed in any form. Everyone knows the vanity of this world. Allah has sent down the relevant *ayat* to people. Not everyone can perform prayer at the proper time. In this situation sharia allows the performance of prayer at a convenient time, since, according to the *ayah*, for busy people it is not the time that is obligatory, but the actual performance of the prayer.' [Täräk äl-salat: gözersez namaz qaldıru — möshriklek khättä köferlek sıyfatıdır. Namaz hıch waqıt mümınneng östennän saqıt bulmıydır, töshmıder. Shulay bulgach, namaznı nıdı häldä dä ütärgä tieshleder. Läkin dünya mäshäkate barlıgı härkemgä mäglümder. Allah rabb äl-galämin mondıy häldä jır yüzeneng törle äklımnärendä yashägän adäm balalarına müäfiq ayätlärlä ingdergänder. Bar keshe dä waqıtında namazın ütäu mömkin tügelder. Menä mondıy häldä shärigat' möqaddäsemez namaznı nıdı waqıt taba alasın, shul waqıtta ütärgä rökhset itäder, chünki ayat kärimägä bınään, mäshgül keshelärgä namaznı ütäu öchen waqıt shart tügelder, bälki namaznı ütäu sharttır'] [F. Akhatova's personal archive].

<sup>2</sup> The decision is the same whether someone has stolen from a single person or from the community. One must act according to the *ayah* وَالسَّارِقُ وَالسَّارِقَةُ فَاقْطَعُوا أَيْدِيَهُمَا and judge according to the secular law. After that Allah will forgive.' [Kıräk, aerım keshe malın ırlasın, kıräk jämägat' malın ırlasın — khökem berder: وَالسَّارِقُ وَالسَّارِقَةُ فَاقْطَعُوا أَيْدِيَهُمَا ayat kärimäsenä bınään, dönya khökemendä khökem itelergä tieshle. Monıng songında Alläh gafu qılachaq'] [F. Akhatova's personal archive].

However, scientific *tafsir* in the Soviet Union was the property of a narrow circle of the educated élite who hoped to create some sort of counterweight to the mighty atheist propaganda, but did not dare to oppose the state directly. The possible influence of transnational networks on the formation of such views among the Islamic theologians of Central Russia cannot be ruled out, particularly in connection with ‘Abd al-Bari Isaev’s close contacts with Ziya al-Din Babakhanov (1908–1982), the Mufti of Central Asia, who was known for his ‘fundamentalist’ views, and also with a number of Middle Eastern theologians of that time. In other words, the Qur’anic exegesis of Isaev and those who shared his opinions was formed simultaneously under the influence of the pre-revolutionary Islamic reformers, the contemporary international network of theologians, and also of colleagues from neighbouring regions with whom Isaev was bound by their interest in the texts of the Qur’an and trustworthy *hadith*.

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### Abbreviations

GART — State Archive of the Republic of Tatarstan

### Archival materials

GART, f. R-873, op. 1, d. 25. Complaints and applications by believers and religious associations and materials concerning their examination. Vol. 1., 1967–1974.

F. Akhatova’s personal archive (Kiev, Ukraine).

Bibarsov family archive (Srednyaya Elyuzan, Gorodishchensky District, Penza Oblast).

Isaev family archive (St Petersburg, Moscow, Russia; Dushanbe, Tajikistan). 246 ff. Materials from this private archive were catalogued by the author. The pagination in the references is the author’s.

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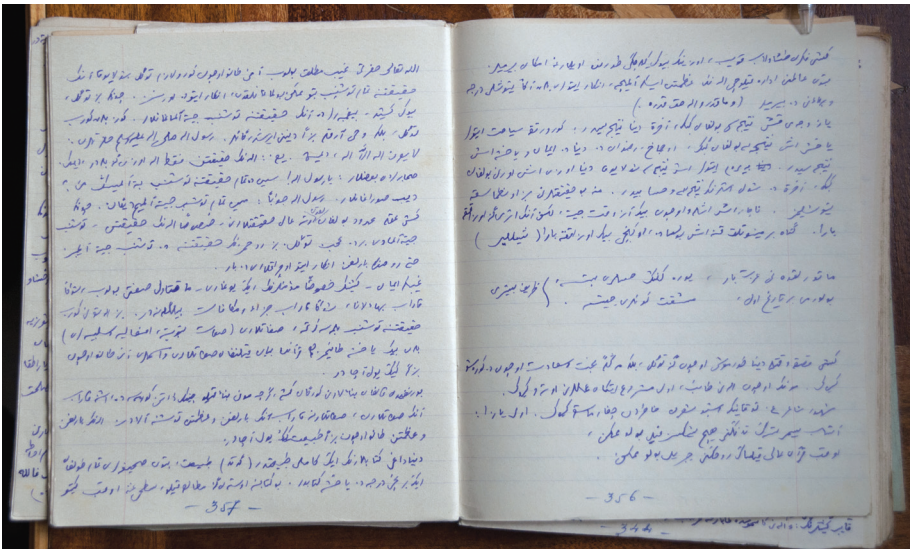
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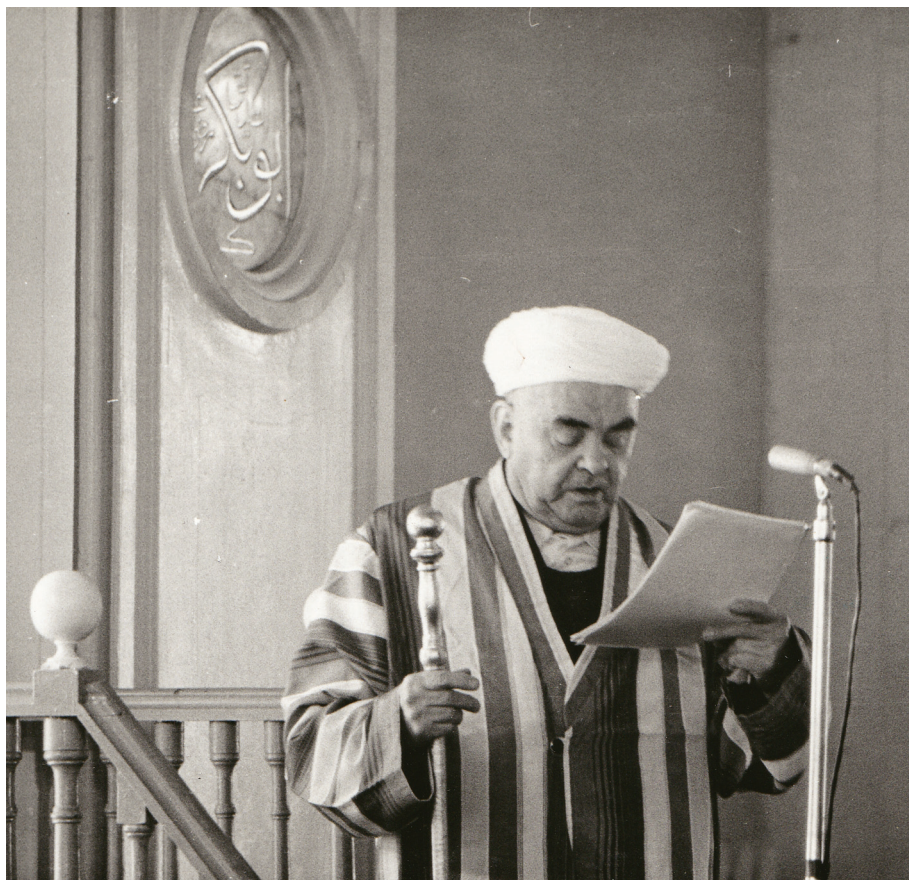
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*Translated by Ralph Cleminson*

# Illustrations from the article by Alfrid Bustanov



III. 1. Extract from a Text by Fath al-Qadir Babich  
[Bibarsov family archive]



III. 2. 'Abd al-Bari Isaev giving a sermon  
at the Friday prayer at the mosque in Ufa, late 1970s  
[Photo collection in Isaev family archive]

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البقرة ۲

تولوا ائمانا بالله وما انزل الينا  
وما انزل الى ابراهيم واسحق ويعقوب  
والاسبط وما اوتوا موسى وعيسى  
واما اوتوا النبيون من بينهم لانفروا  
بيد ايديهم ونحن مسلمون .

ائمانا، مؤمنلارا قاللار ائمانا  
دولار ائمانا ائمانا، فرانلار دولار ابراهيم  
ائمانا، كيتانلار دولار اسماعيل اسحاق  
و يعقوب هم الانلار اوللار نبيلر  
كيتانلار دولار موسى وعيسى، كيتانلار  
دولار نبيلر ائمانا الله  
بيلر ائمانا، كيتانلار ائمانا

III. 3. An example of Isaev's work with the Quran, 1960s. Surah Al-Baqara [The Cow], ayat 136. The Arabic original is given in green, the Tatar translation in red

~~صياحت الاطعمة والاشربة~~  
والصند والربانج

~~الاطعام والاشربة والقصد~~

مباحة اللباس والزينة  
اللباس والزينة 8 آية

سورة الاعراف 8 آية

يذكر سورة تكلم وريشا ولباس المقوم ذلك طر ذلك من  
ايه الله لعلمك يذمرون ان ادم او خلاصت من لباسها  
اول لباسها من ادم او خلاصت من لباسها  
يو ساقلا تلبس في لبس ادم او خلاصت من لباسها  
لا وخطلا تلبس

سورة الاعراف اليمين آية بين ادم خف وان يفتك عند كل مسجود للوا  
و اشروع وانس ضد الله لما يجب المسير بين ادم او خلاصت من لباسها  
تد كايه اوتة اعمر لا حيا او عجز زينة كيوصل من الله ليل  
تاسر اوتة اسراف الله الا اسراف يوت من سورة

سورة الاعراف 23 آية قل من حرم زينة الله التي اخرج لعباده  
والطيب من الرف كل هي للذين اصنوا امر الجموع الدنيا فالعنة  
يوع القيامة لذ لك تفصل اليت لفق يلعون

ايه ام نحو اليت من اجمع حلقاء زينة لم من اكلاد سوا ليد  
بر حلا ان تامل من لبس اية ام نحو اول زينة لم من اكلاد  
وقس حلقاء دنيا اراقتها البان لير ويدا  
سوا ليد به تد حان ادم له اسير من زينة حاد ليل

III. 4. A thematic (maudu'i) translation of the Quran, 1970s. Ufa. Section on clothing and jewellery. The Arabic original is given in green, the Tatar translation in red