The Chechen war has fuelled an academic and political debate about Russia’s cultural essence and its relations with Islam. In particular, it has highlighted the issue of political Islam and Islamic extremism and its relationship with the Christianity-based system of liberal democratic values.

All-Russian Islamic political parties and movements

In terms of its impact, the effect of perestroika on Russia’s umma could be compared to the political liberalization at the beginning of the twentieth century. Both gave a revitalizing impetus to Russia’s umma and stimulated the political activity of its members. Gorbachevian Russia witnessed the emergence of a number of political parties and organizations which placed Islam at the centre of their identity. Some of those organizations claimed to represent Muslims from all over Russia, others confined their activities to a particular region, an autonomous republic, or even a city, a town or a village. Those with nationwide status were, for example, the Islamskaja Partia Vozrozhdenija (the Islamic Renaissance Party, the IRP), the Islamic public movement Nur (Light), the Soyuz Musul’man Rossii (the Union of Muslims of Russia, the UMR), the Islamskii Kul’turnii Tsentr (the Islamic Cultural Centre, the ICC) and the movement Refah (Prosperity).

Among more or less noted regional Islamic organizations were: the Islamic public movement Musul’mane Rossii (Muslims of Russia) which had some following in the Middle Volga, primarily in the Saratov and Penza regions; the party of Ittifaq (Union) and the movement Musul’mane Tatarstana (Muslims of Tatarstan), both in Tatarstan; the Islamic organization of Islamiyya and the Islamic Democratic Party (the IDP); the Islamic Party of Dagestan (the IPD), all based in Makhachkala and the Chechen
parties of *Islamkaia Natsia* (Islamic Nation) and *Islamskii Put’* (Islamic Path). Despite the claims of their leaders to represent Russia’s entire *ummna*, most of these parities and movements were *de facto* relatively closed associations of intellectuals, or political adventurers. So far, none of them has managed to attract a wider Islamic public and approximate the rating of the *Ittifaq* Party at the beginning of the century. Their activity has often coincided with the all-Russian, or regional elections. Their political programmes have lacked clarity and tended towards abstract theorectization, utopian aspirations and doctrinal confusion. Most of them have subscribed to the idea of an Islamic state in Russia, where Muslims constitute a minority. Also, having declared their allegiance to Islamic unity within Russia, they have in fact promoted the administrative and doctrinal fragmentation of Russia’s *ummna*.

Among the first Islamic parties was the Islamic Renaissance Party (the *IRP*), which was created under the Soviet regime in 1990 in Astrakhan.¹ The founding fathers of the *IRP* were Ahmed-qadi Ahtaev, Geydar Jemal² and Veli Ahmed Sadur.³ The activists of the *IRP* were mainly Tatars, Bashkirs, Caucasians and Tajiks. The doctrinal foundation of the party was *Salafi* Islam and its declared goal was the re-Islamization of society and polity in Muslim-populated regions of the USSR. The major targets of the *IRP’s* criticism were the official Islamic clerics who were regarded as *munafiqin* (hypocrites).⁴ Nevertheless, the leaders of the *IRP* stressed their adherence to peaceful constitutional politics and pledged their loyalty to the Kremlin. They regarded education and propaganda as their main mediums of influence. Following the disintegration of the *IRP* in 1992, its Moscow- and Makhachkala-based branches turned into independent parties, although nominally autonomous. IRPs also existed in Chechnya and the Middle Volga (Nizhni Novgorod, Saratov), Tatarstan (Kazan) and Tumen. The leaders of the Dagestani *IRP* in Makhachkala were Ahmed-qadi Ahtaev and brothers Bagauddin and Ilyas Kebedov. The Central Russian group, based in Moscow, was headed by Geydar Jemal. In terms of political influence the Dagestani *IRP* was more prominent than the Moscow party, which united just a few conflicting intellectuals. Ahmed-qadi Ahtaev, who bore the title of *amir*, was a noted Dagestani intellectual, theologian and doctor. He was convinced that Russia’s Muslims needed an effective Islamic political party which would promote their specific interests on various political and administrative levels.

Ahtaev and his followers believed in the moral and spiritual superiority of Islam and advocated the gradual transformation of Dagestan into a modern Islamic state. Like other proponents of *Salafi* Islam, Ahtaev regarded Sufism as a later distortion and deviation from original pure