

Russians Question Muslim Influence

Hi again! Nice to have you with us on As It Is. I'm Mario Ritter.

Last week Muslims around the world celebrated Eid al-Adha. In English, the four-day celebration is called the Feast of Sacrifice. It recognizes the willingness of the Prophet Ibrahim to sacrifice his son for God. In the end, God told Ibrahim to sacrifice an animal instead.

Most Muslims celebrate the holiday with a feast. They often share a meal with friends or family. They may also sacrifice a sheep or cow, and give the meat to people who are poor or hungry.

Today we visit some Muslims in Moscow. Russia now has two million Muslims. That is more than any city in Europe. VOA reporter James Brooke looked at how the Muslim population is affecting the Russian capital. Steve Ember has his story.

Last Tuesday, thousands of Muslims began the Eid al-Adha holiday by praying on the streets of Moscow. Some prayer mats were spread below the 100-year-old Moscow Cathedral Mosque.

There are only three other mosques in the city.

Abdul Bari Sultanov is a Russian Muslim from the republic of Tatarstan. He says every neighborhood should have a mosque and a Muslim religious school.

But new mosque projects never seem to win building permits. Geydar Bzhemal says Russia's central government is blocking new Islamic centers in the city.

"They understand the politics of suppression -- direct suppression. And they don't understand that this will create problems for themselves much worse than those they are trying to solve now."

Sergei Sobyenin is the mayor of Moscow. He was re-elected last month. He says the city will not approve any new mosques. He says the Muslims praying in streets on holidays are not Russian citizens. He says they are mainly Central Asians, guest workers who will return to their own countries.

Voters seem to agree with Mr. Sobyenin. Some Russians have expressed anger against Central Asians and Caucasians who live in Russia. Earlier this month one Slavic neighborhood rioted against those immigrants, many of whom are Muslim.

"Russia forward! Russia forward!"

The riots started because a Slavic Russian man was stabbed to death. An immigrant from Azerbaijan is accused of killing him.

In addition to the riots, police detained about 2,000 migrant workers. Some politicians called for a law banning apartment sales to foreigners. They also want to restrict visas on migrants from Muslim nations along Russia's southern border. Not long ago, those nations were part of the Soviet Union.

Isolda Kukushkina moved to Moscow from Ukraine in the early 1980s. She was near the Cathedral Mosque on Tuesday, looking at all the Muslim men praying in the street.

She says she is worried that Moscow will turn Muslim. The city, she says, must keep its Slavic identity.

I'm Steve Ember.

Muslim customs in Libya have also been in the news recently. Most people in that country are Sunni Muslims.

Recently, Libya's top religious official, the Grand Mufti, declared that all women teachers must cover their faces when teaching young men. Sheikh Sadik Al-Ghariani did not say that unrelated men and women should never be in the same room together. But, he said the best idea would be to separate men and women at schools and universities.

His comments angered activists. One woman, named Nareen, says the Grand Mufti's ideas take the country backwards.

"Well, I'm very upset. I think it's, it's a huge step back. It's very sad to see that this is the way our education system is going. That they're looking back into segregating women and men and children."

Sheikh Sadik Al-Ghariani served as grand mufti when Moammar Gadhafi was Libya's leader. Rebels re-appointed him to keep the position after Mr. Gadhafi was killed.

Traditionally, the Grand Mufti's decisions do not have the force of law. But, they can shape government policies. And reformers like Nareen are worried that the Grand Mufti is helping make Libya more conservative.

"It's a long-term political agenda, yes, of course. Because if you start with the education ... When you want to change a nation you target education because you're breeding the future generations. And so you target education because that then will... that's when you are ingraining what the future will be. So by them targeting the schools, they're sowing the seeds of the future they want."

Another activist, a woman named Leila, says Islamists in Libya are moving little by little.

"They are waiting for the reaction, how it's going to be. So that's their way of trying to take over."

She says many activists are afraid to speak out. When they do, she says, they receive threats or warnings.

"They target the family. They target your family just to silence you, shut you up. What they are doing is, is much, much more... it's like octopus. Their hands are everywhere, here and here and here and there."

In his recent remarks, the Grand Mufti said male and female students must be separate during break times. In other words, boys and girls cannot be together on the playground or in the hallway. And, he said boys and girls should use separate doors. Girls also should not wear make-up or use perfume, he said.

Earlier in the year the Grand Mufti sent a letter to Libyan politicians. In it, he warned that Allah would be angry unless males and females were strictly separated at schools, universities, and even in government offices.

The Ministry of Education will now have to decide what to tell schools about separating boys and girls.

And that's As It Is. I'm Mario Ritter. Thanks for listening. If you would like reach us, send an email to learningenglish@voanews.com. Or go to our website at learningenglish.voanews.com and click on "Contact Us."

We leave you with the music of American musician Dizzy Gillespie. Mr. Gillespie was a trumpet player, composer and founder of modern jazz. He was born on October 21, 1917.