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Renat Bekkin (b. 1979). D.Sc. in Economics, Ph.D. in Law.

One of the leading Russian experts in Islamic law, Islamic economy and finance. The pioneer of studying Islamic economy in Russia. The author of monographs: 'Insurance in Islamic Law: Theory and Practice' (2001), 'Islamic Economy: Short course' (2008), 'Islamic Economic Model Nowadays' (2009 - 1st edition, 2010 - 2nd edition), 'Islamic Insurance (Takaful)' (2012 - 1st edition, 2014 - 2nd edition) and more than 100 articles on Islamic economy, finance and Islamic law. In 2012 he provided Islamic insurance products for "Evro-Polis" insurance company firstly launched takaful at the Russian market. Permanent member of Shariah board at Mutual insurance society "Takaful" (Kazakhstan) - since 2010; Shariah advisor at "Evro-Polis" insurance company (2012-2013). The head of Oriental and Islamic studies department at the Kazan Federal University (Kazan, Russia); Senior research fellow at the Institute for African studies, Russian Academy of Sciences (Moscow, Russia).

You are the author and co-author of ten monographs and textbooks and have written more than 150 journal articles covering the topic of Islamic finance and economics. Tell us when the idea to become a Shariah scholar first came to your mind.

When I was a student at the International Law faculty of the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO-University), one of the mandatory subjects on our curriculum was Arabic language. It was then that I decided to combine law and language and started to read books and articles on Islamic law. One day when I was searching the Internet I came across an interesting paper. It was a discussion between two Muslim scholars on legitimacy of insurance from the view point of Islamic law. One of the scholars was a proponent of Islamic insurance model, named takaful which is an Islamic alternative to conventional insurance used in the Western world. The concept seemed interesting to me and I started to explore the subject further. I decided to write my graduation thesis on takaful and then, in 2001, I published a book "Insurance in Islamic law: Theory and Practice". The book eventually grew into my Ph.D. dissertation.

It was the first-ever scientific research paper on Islamic insurance or takaful as you prefer to call it published in the CIS region, wasn't it?

Yes, it was. While working on this book I plunged into the study of Islamic insurance and realised that takaful could be implemented in Russia within the current Russian legislation.

I prepared a 'road map' for the development of takaful business in Russia.

Tell us a bit more about Islamic finance and takaful in Russia.

In 2004, I was approached by a manager of a regional insurance company named "Itil" who offered me to take up a role of a head of the project for setting up a takaful business in one of the Russian republics, namely, the Republic of Tatarstan. It was planned that "Itil" itself would be converted into takaful company. However, at some point the owner of the company changed his mind and the project was put on hold and then aborted. Later, I was engaged in three more projects on takaful as a Shariah advisor. Only the last of them succeeded. By then I have already realised that the smaller the company, the easier it would be to carry out the project through to the completion. Speaking about the successful takaful project, it was implemented on the basis of "Evro-Polis" insurance company, for which I developed a line of Shariah compliant insurance products for. In June 2012, we sold our first Islamic insurance policy. It was a real breakthrough in this direction. Eight years have passed before Islamic insurance business was first started in Russia. By the way, my colleague and pupil (as she calls herself) Kuralai Eldesbai in Kazakhstan also managed to realise the idea of takaful in Kazakhstan and established "Takaful" mutual insurance society in the city of Almaty. I am the member of the Shariah Board of this society.

What about other Islamic financial institutions in Russia?

Financial institutions providing Islamic financial services are primarily concentrated in three Russian regions: Tatarstan, Bashkortostan and Dagestan – the Russian republics with significant ethnic Muslim population.

Nowadays one can find subsidiaries of Islamic financial institutions from these regions in Moscow. However, Moscow with its one to two million Muslim population is still a Terra Incognita for Islamic finance. I have made a study of Islamic financial institutions' activity in Russia and came to some interesting conclusions. The first and in my opinion foremost problem for such institutions is the very low level of business ethics. The main idea of making business in Russia is that you will not succeed in business if you are honest, you have to be dishonest both with the state and your competitors in the market. Unfortunately, these words are true about the majority of Russian businessmen, including Muslim businessmen. The second problem is the lack of transparency among Islamic financial institutions that operate in Russia. However, it may well be the consequence of the first problem, Islamic finance institutions do not feel comfortable in the Russian current political and business environment and prefer to hide rather than advertise their activity to the market. The third problem is the lack of social responsibility of Islamic business in Russia. In 2000, I worked at "Badr-Forte bank", the first bank in Russia that provided Islamic financial services. I saw a lot of request from people and businesses (especially small ones) for financial assistance. However, I have not seen that the bank provided financial assistance to any of them and I doubt if it has. I think Islamic financial institutions nowadays can fail in case they are not social responsible and socially oriented. I do not mean zakah only. It is general responsibility. What I mean is broad social activity. Solidarity business in France is a good example to follow for Islamic financial institutions. We should understand that Islamic economy is not only a set of financing techniques; it is much more, I would say, it is the philosophy of business (including conduct of all actors in the business from the general manager to its junior colleague).

What are your current areas of research?

Islamic economy and Islamic law are not the only areas of my interest. For example, now I am doing a historic and topographic research on Muslims in St. Petersburg. You know, St. Petersburg was the capital of the Russian Empire. It was a multicultural city from its very establishment. A lot of Tatars (that is the main Muslim nationality in Russia) were attracted to the new city as builders, sailors, soldiers. In the 19s and 20s centuries, Muslim minority in St. Petersburg pushed a lot of worthy figures: scientists, doctors, military men (including high ranked officers), lawyers, merchants-philanthropists etc.

Have you made some interesting discoveries, can you tell us about them?

I do not know what you mean by discoveries. For example, if we take research on Muslims in St. Petersburg, I have spent a lot of time in archives and libraries and discovered a lot of unpublished information on this subject. It is a big fortune to find a place in a small town near St. Petersburg, where a mosque was situated many-many years ago. I think, when you make a serious deep research you are discovering a brand new world for yourself and for others. I also hope I could provide a fresh view on takaful and Islamic finance in my books and articles. Being apologist of the conservative approach towards Islamic finance in general and Islamic insurance in particular (such approach prevails in the Gulf countries as opposed to the more liberal Malaysia), I provided some critical comments on the performance of Islamic financial institutions which take more liberal views on Islamic finance principles. Also, I have examined not only technical aspects of Islamic finance but also philosophical and cultural foundations of the phenomenon. This enables the reader to measure the scale, prospects and influence of Islamic finance on the development of the financial services market in the world taking into account cultural and religious differences between people around the world.

Propos recueilli par Ezzedine Ghlamallah