

RADICAL ISLAM IN CHECHNYA

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ABSTRACT

The permeation of radical Islam in Chechnya has served a multi-faceted function. It has been the vehicle of separatist resistance, a platform of political strife and conflict, a source of funding and external support and a unifying ideological principle that, in its various interpretations, has brought both hope and destruction for the Chechen society. More often than not, Islam served as a political-ideological tool that brought the promise of legitimacy and was the main source of contention between the Chechen political factions. For 21st century Russia, radical Islam in Chechnya provided a different type of challenge – one that turned into an opportunity for justifying its counter-terrorist operations in the Caucasus.

Radical Islam in Chechnya

Modern Origins of Chechen Islamization

Since 1989, radical Islam has gradually permeated the fabric of Chechnya's socio-political environment. This process was aided by internal changes in the Soviet Union – the disintegration of the communist ideology and its supporting governmental structure; and the course of Perestroika, which allowed various factions to freely propagate their moral and religious values. The resulting ideological and political vacuum in Chechnya was rapidly filled by radical Islam.

From the onset of its post-Soviet attempts to achieve independence, the new secular government in Chechnya took steps that indicated an aspiration to restore Islamic traditions. In this regard, during his initiation as Chechen president on November 9, 1991, retired Lieutenant-General of Soviet Air-Forces, Djohar Dudayev was sworn in holding a Koran in front of numerous representatives of Islamic religious institutions. During his inauguration ceremony, Dudayev promised to abide by and to protect the Islamic faith[1].

The Russian federal government's efforts to establish martial law in Chechnya and to disarm the military branches of the National Chechen People's Congress (OKЧН) resulted in an upsurge of Islamic sentiments among the local population and increasing usage of Islamic rhetoric by radical-nationalist elements in Chechnya. Setting aside their differences, the majority of Chechen factions amalgamated "around D. Dudayev as a symbol of national independence"[2], thereby considerably augmenting his political influence.

Thus, for the first time in over 100 years, the Chechen government faced the question of establishing autonomous governance. Initially, the Chechen leadership contemplated an independent political entity – according to Dudayev, "...a secular, constitutional state with equal rights, obligations and opportunities for all citizens."[3] was being formed in Chechnya. According to most analysts, Dudayev's foundational plans did not include the formation of a theocracy[4].

However, the influence of what Dudayev called "religious belief as a foundation", upon which "people could unite", and a cultural-historical heritage that pertains to "majestic pages of the past, struggles against subjugators and immortal souls of great ancestors"[5], gradually began to tilt the scales in favor of declaring Islam as the national religion. Chechen Islamization was further accelerated by Grozny's[6] frustration that resulted from failure to achieve international recognition of Chechnya as an independent entity. International refusal to support Chechen separatist aspirations made adherence to internationally accepted norms of governance redundant in the eyes of the Chechen leadership. Furthermore, the lack of recognition once again raised the issue of ideological and political vision of the Chechen system of governance. According to Cornell[7], "Chechnya was under both internal and external pressure to increase the Islamic character of the state and of the struggle." It was at that point in time – before the beginning of the First Chechen War in December 1994 – that the Chechen separatists established their first significant ties with Middle Eastern radical Islamists. Forces emerged from a number of Muslim countries that actively supported Dudayev's line of separatism and of strengthening Islam's

integration into the Chechen society as an additional factor of political contention against Moscow. Groups of missionaries, who called themselves “preachers of Islam”, arrived in the North Caucasus from Syria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Turkey, and Libya[8]. Many of these Arab fighters were Afghani veterans, whose incursion in Chechnya was sanctioned by the leadership of Al Qaeda and other Global Jihadi organizations[9].

The Islamic missionaries who infiltrated Chechnya were representatives of fundamentalist political Islam in its Salafi-Jihadi interpretation[10] (the Russian media coined “Wahhabists” as a generic term for Salafi Islamists and Arab fighters in general in Chechnya[11]). In the Early 1990’s these “Wahhabi” emissaries operated according to a simple scheme: local Mullahs and Imams were offered one-time grants of \$1-1.5 thousand plus a monthly salary of \$100-150 in return for their consent to join the Wahhabi sect[12]. Thus, Sufi Chechens encountered for the first time active propaganda by members of the Salafi-Jihadi movement, who encouraged Chechens to reject Sufism and follow a radical interpretation of Islam[13]. In addition to “Wahhabi” propagators, Chechnya became a popular destination for Middle Eastern militants and mercenaries, including the Afghani mujahedeen, who were supplied with weapons and transferred to the Caucasus[14]. The most prominent figure among foreign fighters in Chechnya was Ibn al-Khattab, who arrived in Chechnya along with eight other fighters in spring 1995. Khattab and his companions established a “foreign holy warrior” battalion, which played a critical role in Chechen military operations from 1996-1999 and offered military training to Chechen separatists[15].

It is apparent that this influx of support from abroad played a decisive role in Dudayev’s shift towards Islamic values, and his consequent disengagement from the secular model of government. Islam settled in as the main form of Chechen self-identification in the post-Soviet period and quickly became a symbol of opposition to the modern Russian state and to the Christian civilization altogether.

The First Chechen War and its Aftermath

Islamist ideology was put to active use during the First Chechen War in 1994-1996. The fight for independence (as it was perceived by most Chechens at the time) received its political and spiritual grounding in the militant interpretation of the Koranic verses that call for armed struggle against “infidel” occupiers of Muslim territories. The idea of militant Jihad – armed resistance aimed at completely eradicating the “kafirs” (non-Muslims) from Chechen territory – became an ubiquitous notion. The spirit of Jihad penetrated practically all Chechen regions; it inspired and unified different layers of society, especially the younger generations. Green headbands with statements taken from the Koran were worn by many young Chechens, who vowed to fight without regard to their own lives, as warriors of Islam[16]. In this light, perpetrators of numerous terrorist and guerilla attacks throughout the war, including the ones masterminded by Shamil Basayev in Budyonnovsk (1995) and Pervomayskoye (1996), wore green Islamic headbands, clearly exhibited Islamist characteristics[17]. Both attacks are generally referred to as watersheds of the First Chechen War that influenced the strategic and political relations between Yeltsin’s administration and the separatist Chechen government[18].

The attack in Budyonnovsk remains one of the most successful terrorist attacks in history[19] as well as a painful memory in Russia's counter-terrorist experience. On June 14, 1995, a group of 80 Chechen separatists led by Shamil Basayev ceased over 200 hostages in a hospital in Budyonnovsk[20]. After two dreadfully unsuccessful tactical attempts by Russian security forces, the Russian Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin entered into negotiations with Shamil Basayev. The leaders agreed that in exchange for the hostages, the Russian government would temporarily halt military activity in Chechnya and concentrate on further negotiations with the Chechens. On June 19, all hostages were released and the terrorists returned to Chechnya, putting an end to the crisis. In the aftermath of the attack, Russia underwent a considerable amount of frustration and humiliation with regard to its leadership. At that time, Shamil Basayev, who was welcomed by many Chechens as a national hero, inspired another warlord, Salman Raduyev, to repeat his "heroic deed" in Dagestan. This resulted in the infamous copycat capture of a hospital in Kizlyar and a tragic hostage-barricade standoff with incompetent Russian forces in Pervomayskoye in January 1996[21]. The attack in Pervomayskoye was followed by Yeltsin's demonstrative pre-election decision to end military operations and begin peace negotiations with Chechen separatist leaders in spring and summer 1996, which the latter interpreted as a sign of incompetence and weakness on the part of the Russian government[22].

Thus, with their comprehensive network of financial and operational support, training camps, military successes and substantial appeal to the Chechen youth, foreign "Wahhabists" were able to play a decisive role in the outcome of the First Chechen War[23].

Djohar Dudayev's death on April 21, 1996 and the conclusion of the First Chechen War with the signing of the cease-fire agreement at Khasavyurt on the 22nd of August the same year marked a watershed in Chechen history. With a ceasefire in place and considerable Russian concessions gained at Khasavyurt, the separatist leadership once again faced the problem of defining the principles upon which Chechen governance was to be formed. This question had to be resolved promptly, as the multitude of battle-hardened former combatants – headed during the war by Chechen field commanders (warlords) – were less than enthusiastic about the prospect of immediately returning to peaceful labor. The militants aspired to retain their war-time status, which, aside from its ideological value, was lucrative due to financial incentives. Funding for the insurgents' military activities originated in a number of pro-Chechen (secular and Islamic) charities in the Persian Gulf, Jordan, Turkey, Europe and the United States[24], as well as from members of the Chechen Diaspora in Russia and abroad[25]. With the newly established political quasi-independence from Russia, the radical militants lost a major source of legitimacy for their continued existence. New channels of sustenance had to be acquired; and, reluctant to pursue traits other than combat, the militants increasingly engaged in criminal activities that required their combative skills. Robberies, extortion, kidnappings and drug trafficking[26] became key sources of funding for a multitude of Chechen organizations. At first in Chechnya and later outside its borders, militants kidnapped great numbers of innocent civilians, while they tried to justify criminal activity as a necessary step in their efforts to protect Chechnya and the Muslim world in general against the irreligious Russian authorities. Furthermore, the kidnapers were confident in their ability to continue criminal activities due to the nature of Chechen social structure. The Chechen tribal system traditionally obliges clan members to support their relatives

even if they are involved in illegal acts[27]. With numerous militant organizations committing crimes on daily basis within the brace of Islamic justification, and more importantly under the protection of their wider circle of relatives, all efforts of the Chechen leadership to present the de facto independent Chechen Republic of Ichkeria[28] as a civilized state were doomed to fail.

Over the course of the first Chechen war and especially in its aftermath, Chechen nationalism was vividly reflected in Chechen efforts to preserve and develop ethnic culture, where Islam took an undisputedly cardinal role. Simultaneously, the process of Chechen Islamization indicated a growing divergence between the structure of the Chechen society and the norms of social-cultural and political conduct commonly accepted by the international community. This process is elucidated in the following developments:

Firstly, Russian criminal law was widely ignored; perceived not only as a foreign, but also as a maleficent code of conduct by most Chechens.

Secondly, following Aslan Maskhadov's inauguration into presidency, other war-time field commanders viewed their former chief of staff merely as a colleague equal in status, albeit accredited with presidential obligations. This culturally embedded disregard for official authority severely hampered Maskhadov's attempts to establish even a ramshackle rule of law in Chechnya[29].

Thirdly, the newly established government was incapable to fully perform its most important functions, exercise monopoly over the use of force, or provide a tenable social net for the poor sectors of the population.

Fourthly, the nation was still plagued by anti-Russian sentiments, which were enrooted in the Chechen society during the war and exemplified by the public refusal to comply with Maskhadov's executive orders regarding the release of Russian prisoners[30].

Fifthly, the formerly sizeable intellectual elite, which was educated in the paradigm of the Soviet system of governance and traditionally served as a moderating and peace-building force, emigrated en masse in the early 1990s. The elite's traditional role was filled by a socially elevated group of military leaders who lacked the administrative experience, resented globally accepted principles of bureaucratic conduct, were influenced by war-time common-law institutions and were inclined to uphold archaic or traditional methods of organizing society.

Finally, the government's control was severely impeded by harsh competition between the ethnic clans, which strived to dominate Chechnya's financial and economic structures.

Islam as an Instrument of Political Legitimacy

In light of the above, Islam remained the only feasible platform for uniting the scattered archipelago of Chechen clans into a civilizationally and ideologically coherent entity[31]. Islam's century-old authority as a symbol of separatist resistance in Chechnya[32] was reassured

through the victory in the First Chechen War. Thus, when in the immediate aftermath of the war, president Maskhadov's entourage encountered a wave of insubordination from field commanders and tribal elders, nation-wide crime and complete disintegration of civil institutions, it became clear that order could only be achieved through decisive and resourceful measures. This somewhat desperate environment gave birth to the idea of establishing an "Islamic state", wherein all legal, moral and social conduct is regulated by Sharia. By the mid-1990s, Chechen authorities clearly demonstrated their civilizational identification with Islamic tradition, justified their policies through Islamic Sharia law, and presented the general population with the requirement to accept Islam's unique form of rectitude, while threatening to punish defiance in a manner compliant with Islamic teachings[33].

By virtue of the above, contention between the official authorities and various tribal and military leaders was moved into the sphere of jurisprudential debate, thereby alleviating armed confrontation. Such mitigation of internal strife and criminal activity by means of Islamic law was described by the former Foreign Affairs Minister of the Republic of Ichkeria as "an important success, significant achievement for Chechen statehood"[34]. He went on to proclaim the following:

"We are shaping the governmental structures according to the laws of Sharia. The so-called Roman law, widely practiced around the world, is incompatible with the Chechen nature. It remains unaccepted and therefore disobeyed by many. To form legislation we must find a platform that could be accepted by the people. For the Chechen nation, Islam is such a platform. Otherwise, we will get an armed, uncontrollable mass, which will create many problems for everyone, including Russia"[35].

This Islamic imperative, dictated predominantly by circumstance, rather than explicit premeditation of the Chechen politicians, is further clarified by observers who attest to the traditional weakness of Chechen religiousness. Historians have rarely characterized the Chechen people as devout, religiously humble, scrupulously adherent to the principles of Koran and prayer, let alone theologically knowledgeable. In addition, very few indigenous Sharia specialists existed in Chechnya at the time. This lack of cultural predisposition to fundamental religiosity explains the political leadership's hesitation and subsequent adaptation of Sharia law merely as a radical measure of consolidating power[36].

One of Maskhadov's first recorded statements regarding the prospect of an Islamic state in Chechnya was voiced on 8 August, 1997. In early November of the same year, Maskhadov declared the establishment of the Islamic Chechen Republic during an official visit to Turkey[37]. The evolution of Maskhadov's pro-Islamic perspective can be traced to his statements of January 1997. At that time, the Chechen president asserted that he favors the prospect of having a combination of secular and religious functions in the forthcoming republic (synergy between religion and government constitutes a fundamental principle of the Islamic state[38]); especially in light of the fact that Islam does not rule out democratic elections. Subsequent developments, including the shocking public executions of criminals and violators of Islam's moral-ethical codes in September 1997, confirmed three major dispositions:

Firstly, the Chechen government was tenacious in its intention to achieve order. Secondly, Maskhadov wanted the opposition to see his determination to Islamize the political sphere. For this purpose, he utilized Sharia as a “severe, but just”[39] measure against all opponents, including former brothers-in-arms. Thirdly, public displays similar to the 1997 executions served the worldwide Chechens media efforts to show “deep civilizational gaps between Russia and Chechnya”. In this manner, Aslan Maskhadov actively employed Islamist rhetoric in order to consolidate his political power and to achieve additional legitimacy in the eyes of the general Chechen population.

The Radical Factions

Islamist ideology was not used only by the Chechen president. Chechen warlords, who aspired to adopt an ideology that would vindicate their otherwise unjustifiable goals, increasingly utilized Islam as a platform to gain political power and legitimacy. Naturally, secular forms of government were ill-suited in this respect. Many Chechen field commanders opposed Maskhadov’s authority and some even thought themselves to be more suitable national leaders[40]. A constitutional legislative system, free elections and secular courts were thus detrimental to the efforts of oppositional warlords who aimed to depose Maskhadov[41]. However, the Salafi-Jihadi warlords enjoyed only location-specific support and were usually backed only by their respective clans. In this fragmented system of constituencies, the population of the mountainous regions of Chechnya, including the villages of Vedeno and Za-Vedeno, supported the infamous Shamil Basayev. Salman Raduyev, on the other hand, drew support from the town of Gudermes and the eastern territories bordering Dagestan. Supporters from Urus-Martan sustained Arbi Barayev, while Ibn Al-Khattab’s[42] forces effectively controlled the Serjen-Yurt region.[43] Despite their position as virtually unrivalled local rulers, these field commanders lacked access to nation-wide backing. Although, due to the fragmented nature of their constituencies, the warlords were unlikely to gain control of the state, their rising power and Islamist ideology threatened the political influence of clan elders and was alarming for the Mehk-Khel (central organ of traditional authority in Chechnya, founded on inter-clan relations). The Muftiat (council of Muslim clerics), represented mainly by senior Muslim clergy, agreed with these concerns. Traditional Muslim leaders in Chechnya were thus quite content with the status quo, in which religious authorities remained separated from the secular national government and foreign Islamic agents. Many Muslim scholars opposed the process of “Arabization”, acted against the introduction of Sharia-based courts and strove to preserve the authenticity of Chechen Islam. In reference to the influence of Wahhabi sects in Chechnya, one Chechen scholar stated: “If we did not become Russian after 70 years of Soviet rule, we are not about to become Arab today”[44]

In this light, the oppositional warlords could hardly rely on clan elders, traditional Muftis and the educated classes of the Chechen population for support in their strife vis-à-vis Aslan Maskhadov. Nevertheless, the militant political Islamism, which started to infiltrate in 1990[45], allowed the warlords to undermine any indigenous ideological resistance – including the traditional religious authorities – in the name of “pure, Wahhabi Islam”[46].

“Wahhabism” was therefore used as an ideological platform for political goals despite its inherent incompatibilities with traditional Chechen Sufism[47]. While Salafist followers resent certain aspects of Chechen Sufism, “Wahhabi” Islam was foreign to the social, cultural and political traditions of the Chechen society[48]. Its presence induced internal conflict and ideological chaos. “Wahhabism’s” antagonistic attitude towards Sufism offered the Chechens only one alternative: Saudi Arabia as a model of ideological and political conduct. Foreign “Wahhabi” influence thus led to enmity between proponents of increased political and cultural orientation on Saudi Arabia and other Islamic regimes, and those who aspired to preserve the local form of Islam and the traditional, indigenous foundations of government. Furthermore, for the Chechen society “Wahhabism” constituted an artificially adopted international religious-political ideology, which severely compromised the rudimentary Sufi traditions of ancestral worship, veneration of holy sites and sainthood[49].

The division between proponents of Salafi-Jihadi rule and supporters of Aslan Maskhadov’s government is exemplified by an event that occurred in the summer of 1998. On July 14, 1998, in Gudermes, a quarrel took place between supporters of “Wahhabism” and followers the pro-Maskhadov warlord S. Yamadayev. The “Wahhabists” were led by Arbi Barayev and Abdul-Malik Mezhidov – both prominent warlords self-proclaimed judges in military Sharia tribunals. In the ensuing battle, the inhabitants of the Gudermes region immediately came to the assistance of Yamadayev’s forces. The fight ended with tens of casualties, including 30 Wahhabists, 20 supporters of Aslan Maskhadov and 10 innocent bystanders[50].

In an analysis of the tragic events in Gudermes, Chechen president Aslan Maskhadov asserted that the “Wahhabists” created extra-governmental military and political infrastructures that fail to abide by the rule of law. He accused certain Arab countries of financing “Wahhabist” activities and admitted that he tolerated Islamist activism only for the sake of national unity and while hoping that Islamism may help advance Chechen national interests[51]. Maskhadov ended his statement with a call for Chechen Imams and local authorities to expel Wahhabists from their surroundings. These declarations, however, remained unfulfilled in practice. This was mainly due to active intercession by the Chechen vice-president, Vakha Arsanov, who, together with Shamil Basayev, saved the Salafi-Jihadi forces from total destruction both during and after the confrontation with the Maskhadov’s government forces in Gudermes[52].

Shamil Basayev, formerly a prime minister of the Chechen autonomy, particularly defended the involvement of Ibn Al-Khattab, stating that his education and training of Chechen fighters significantly benefited the Chechen cause[53].

The Gudermes incident led to a sharp polarization of the Chechen society and exposed the full gravity of political confrontation between Islamic factions. In order to create a united front vis-à-vis the “Wahhabi” faction, the Chief Mufti of Ichkeria, Ahmat Kadyrov, initiated a summit of Muslim leaders from Chechnya, Ingushetia and Dagestan. The summit took place in Grozny, in the summer of 1998. Its numerous participants denounced the activities of “Wahhabists” and called upon the government to outlaw “Wahhabism” and “immediately disband armed groups of pro-Wahhabi character”[54].

Within this aggravated power struggle – between the pro-Sufi, publicly elected Aslan Maskhadov, and the pro-“Wahhabi” military-political opposition represented by certain field commanders and former members of government – each side accorded special significance to the mobilization of all religious-ideological resources in order to legitimize its claim to power as the only true bearer and protector of Islamic values. Maskhadov, however, ceased the initiative; he installed Sharia law by executive order on 3 February, 1998[55], which included the establishment of a Sharia ministry of security. The whole legislative foundation was thence conducted according to principles obtained directly from Sharia and the Koran. This entailed, among other things, the eradication of the secular governmental institutions. Maskhadov, however, did not proceed to fully dissolve the parliament. Neither did he take the provocative step of abolishing the constitution, which, in theory, should have been substituted by Sharia law in an Islamic state. The parliament was stripped of its legislative functions, maintaining merely a chimerical supervisory role. The last act of legislation that the parliament was tasked to produce by Maskhadov, was a draft of the Sharia-based constitution – a project that Chechen legislators, in concert with religious clerics, were given a one-month deadline to complete[56].

Realizing that they were losing initiative to Maskhadov’s “Islamic” reforms, the opposition leaders swiftly established their own “Shura (consultative) council. This council’s thirty-five members, including Yandarbiyev, Raduyev, Israyilov, Udugov, Makhashev, Zakayev and others, elected Shamil Basayev as their emir (leader). In his first statement, the emir “having the full authority required for the establishment of an independent Sharia state” [57], accused Maskhadov of conducting “repression against the war fighters and proponents of Chechen independence”[58], and of tearing asunder the nation on “religious principles”. The statement proposed the construction of an Islamic country and, accordingly, the Sharia-based election of a new leader.

Notwithstanding the political competition coming from Basayev, Maskhadov was firmly intent on maintaining monopoly over the process of Sharia integration into Chechnya’s governance and society. In every village, Maskhadov created special squads comprised of reliable supporters, whose purpose was to administer the government’s version of Sharia law. It follows that Maskhadov aspired to set up a unique political system, where Sharia serves as a central cohesive link, while the president is perceived as an advocate, protector and guarantor of Islamic law. Maskhadov openly accused the extremist warlords Umarov and Udugov of propagating a new religious movement, which is directed – ostensibly – by western forces via Saudi Arabia and aimed at disuniting the Chechen Muslims. Maskhadov stated, “[They] are trying to turn us into Afghani Talibs – a docile instrument of the west in the Caucasus. We are Sunnis, followers of the Nakshandi and Kadiriy movement, and there will be no other form of Islam in Chechnya.”[59]

In this paradigm, only the traditional Chechen form of Islam remained acceptable. Maskhadov demanded the exclusion of Wahhabists and supporters of the oppositional council from the Chechen society. In one statement, he called to “... expel them from our villages, restore order”[60]

The politization of Islam in Chechnya had a twofold foundation. Firstly, this process was a result of an objective, civilizational development that took root in the traditional role of Islam in the Chechen society. Secondly, there was a subjective manifestation of competition between parties that strove to utilize Islam to gain legitimacy on the Chechen political proscenium. In this context, the elected government wholly relied on the traditional Caucasian form of Sufi Islam. Maskhadov's government emphasized Sufism's closeness to the Chechen population; the government thereby provided for its own legitimacy as the supreme upholder of traditional Sufism.

The anti-presidential faction, on the other hand, adhered mainly to the radical Wahhabi form of Islam. Their claim for legitimacy was based on universalist, Salafi-Jihadi Islamic values, which, in their opinion, held utmost priority for all Muslims and were used to unite the Chechen nation in order to fuse it into the global Umma.

These spiritual-religious contradictions harbored fully tangible political interests. The Sufist government oriented itself towards strengthening Chechen statehood and towards acquiring greater independence from Moscow, Arab regimes and Western nations. In contrast, the Anti-Maskhadov factions clearly relied on Islamic regimes for funding and support. For this purpose, they demonstrated radical anti-Russian sentiments and showed intention to become part of the mainstream Muslim community, while preserving only minimal ethno-confessional singularities. The relationship with the Muslim nations allowed the latter to create a multifaceted sphere of influence in Chechnya: ideological, economic and political. In this manner, the oppositional factions sacrificed the idea of traditional nationalism on the altar of transnational radical Salafism.

At the same time, the opposing sides accused each other of breaching democratic principles and betraying Chechnya's national interests. The confrontation between the government and the oppositional factions sharpened to the verge of a possible civil war, contained only by a dilute mix of tribal values and Sharia principles.

The internal political struggle, however, did not represent the entire spectrum of opinions regarding radical Islamization in Chechnya. The Salafi-Jihadi influence was severely opposed by some members of the Chechen elite, who openly stated that, "the Muslim world extends beyond Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, which are presented as role models by certain forces in the Chechen society..."[61]. Such statements implied the possibility of creating a traditionally oriented Islamic state, which would de-facto operate along secular principles. It follows that, some members of the Chechen society favored a secular model of government, regardless of whether Chechnya was independent or remained within the borders of the Russian Federation.

Maskhadov made several attempts to reconcile between his government and the oppositional factions: "...from 1996 to 1998, Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov changed his position toward Sufism several times. Having come to power as a representative of Sufism, he immediately came to terms with the radicals, thereby trying to neutralize them as a possible opposition. Representatives of the so-called radical wing were appointed to a number of important posts in the government..."[62]

The Second Chechen War

With the increase of internal confrontation, Chechnya continued to sink into chaos. This tendency was accelerated by the raid conducted in Dagestan by Chechen and Dagestani Islamic extremists under the command of Basayev and Khattab. The goal of the raid was stated as “victory of the just Islamic society, in which there will be no rich or poor”, and “the creation of an Islamic state between the Caspian and the Black seas”[63]. This large scale operation clearly demonstrated the oppositional field commanders’ contempt for Aslan Maskhadov, who was not even notified of the impending action. According to Mairbek Vatchagaev[64], “the military clash in the summer of 1998 in the town of Gudermes between Sufi adherents and the radicals brought Aslan Maskhadov back to the side of the Sufis”.

Neither the attack itself, nor the Islamist affiliation of the Chechen terrorists, was taken lightly by the Russian government. Shamil Basayev’s operation evidently put an end to the August 1999 negotiations between the Chechen and Russian security forces regarding joint fighting against kidnappers and “Wahabbists”. This breach of negotiations then rapidly evolved into a wide “antiterrorist operation” by federal forces in Chechnya, which later became known as the Second Chechen War.

Moscow’s Considerations

Undoubtedly, the Second Chechen War played into Vladimir Putin’s hands, transforming him into a political figure of national proportions, and greatly helped his presidential campaign[65]. Despite the tremendous brutality of the military operation, the majority of Russian citizens supported the war at its initial stages[66]. The self-proclaimed independence in Chechnya was followed by a swift transformation of the region into an enclave of lawlessness and criminal activity. Russia had little choice other than to engage in a radical solution to this blatant challenge to the security of its citizens, especially following the Islamist incursion into Dagestan. Furthermore, the mere existence of a mutinous entity in Chechnya provided incentive for separatist movements elsewhere in Russia and therefore presented a real threat for Russia’s integrity. Thus, the incursion into Chechnya constituted a strong statement directed at other national entities and autonomies within the Russian Federation.

Russian military commanders perceived the war as a chance to atone for the losses suffered in the war in Afghanistan (1979-89), and during the First Chechen War (1994-96). Russian military also wished to demonstrate to the Russia’s neighbors – including NATO – that Moscow will maintain a no tolerance policy towards Islamist insurgents, regardless of foreign governmental and non-governmental criticism.

In such manner, military success in Chechnya simultaneously entailed a number of political rewards for Moscow, including reestablishing territorial integrity, strengthening national unity,

restoring motivation among the armed forces and defending Russia's authority in the international arena.

The price of military success, however, proved to be daunting: thousands of civilians, Russian soldiers and Chechen fighters perished in the war, with displaced persons numbering in the hundreds of thousands. Russian generals managed to complete their main mission towards the beginning of 2001, when the main Chechen formations were defeated. At the end of January 2001 Putin transferred the control of the military operation from the Defense Ministry to the Special Forces, noting that the military campaign would continue.

The fall of the Radical Islamists (and the demise of the Separatist Movement)

Although the separatists were defeated from a military perspective, as long as the notorious leaders such as Hattab, Gelayev, Yandarbiyev, Raduyev, Saydulayev, and Basayev remained active, complete victory over the Chechen insurgents remained a distant notion. Russian analysts correctly assessed that without the liquidation of these Islamist warlords, low-intensity warfare in Chechnya could have lasted for a very long time. This assessment was substantiated by tragic terrorist attacks that followed in Chechnya and in Russia itself – airliner bombings, assassinations of pro-Moscow Chechen leaders, and unprecedentedly brutal attacks in the Moscow Theater Siege (2002)[67], Moscow metro (2004)[68] and in Beslan (2004)[69].

The Moscow Theater (Nord Ost) siege was a devastating terrorist event, conducted by a few dozen Chechen terrorists. Armed with automatic weapons and explosives, the assailants took 850 hostages and demanded the complete withdrawal of Russian forces from Chechnya. The siege was led by Movsar Barayev[70], who was killed along with most terrorists and 129 hostages in the controversial counter-terrorist operation conducted by Russian Special Forces.

In February 2004, Moscow's residents experienced another severe terrorist attack in the Avtozavodskaya metro station. Forty persons lost their lives this suicide attack, which was perpetrated under the instructions of Shamil Basayev and Ibn al-Khattab[71].

The attack in Beslan in September the same year was a pinnacle of Chechen Islamist brutality – an event in which hundreds of hostages were killed, including 186 children and hundreds more were wounded or reported missing.

For the Wahhabists, these terrorist attacks were not only instrumental in transferring operations outside of Chechnya. These devastating acts served as declarative appeals in an attempt to boost the relevance of Chechen Islamists for the international Islamic Jihad community. Despite their massive immediate effect on the Russian population, these attacks failed to provide the Wahhabists with desired funding and support from their foreign benefactors.

In this context, Al-Shihani provides a comprehensive analysis of four major factors that contributed to the demise of radical Jihadi-Salafi warlords in Chechnya[72]: 1) the division in the society that was caused by a clash of values of the traditional Chechen Sufism and foreign Salafist principles; 2) severe funding restrictions imposed mainly by Saudi donors; 3) Russia's

policy of targeted killings and successful monitoring of border crossings; and 4) agenda discrepancies and continued tension between the “Wahhabist” factions and Maskhadov’s mainstream separatist movement.

Al Shihani’s second factor is supported by reports that, in late 2006, Russian security forces obtained the secret archives of the international terrorist Abu Havs[73] – an Arab mercenary who acted as a middle man for Islamic charity organizations in Chechnya. The archives provided evidence that Chechen rebels indeed received funding from Islamic communities in Turkey, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Europe. According to the archive, the flow of funds to radical Islamic groups in Chechnya decreased in 2006. Reportedly, the late Abu Havs complained to his contacts that the flow of funds for insurgency in Chechnya subsided, as financing was being redirected to the Iraqi front. The shift of Saudi funding away from Chechnya is furthermore substantiated by Saudi Arabia’s recent pursuit of a closer relationship with Putin’s Russia, which may have been strengthened during Putin’s visit to the Gulf nations in March 2007[74].

In this manner, due to a shift of international Jihadi interests to the conflict in Iraq in 2003, Russia’s military success and a number of additional reasons[75], the inflow of foreign funding and support to Chechen radicals decreased dramatically. Having lost an important part of their financial and operational channels and driven out by Russian military onslaughts, Chechen “Wahhabists” shifted their base of operations to neighboring Dagestan and Ingushetia, where they maintain a noticeable level of activities[76].

In the beginning of the Second Chechen War, Aslan Maskhadov was intent on retaining his status as a legitimate leader of the Chechen separatists. This was exemplified by his initial condemnation of the terrorist attacks perpetrated by “Wahhabists”. He was consistently supported by a row of Western political groups as the primary party in negotiations aimed at resolving the separatist conflict. As such, the Chechen president relied largely on western financial and political support, which he continued to receive throughout the war until his assassination in 2005. By physically liquidating Maskhadov, Moscow curtailed the possibility of political negotiations with the “moderate” traditional Sufi separatists in Chechnya[77].

Russia’s policy of intensified targeted killings, simultaneously targeting both Maskhadov’s and Basayev’s factions, proved decisive in curtailing Chechen resistance as a whole. This policy resulted in virtually absolute annihilation not only of the most notorious “Wahhabi” terrorists, but also of many “moderate” separatist leaders. Thus, by treating both Chechen factions as a single “separatist” threat, Moscow managed to achieve two crucial objectives: severely hampering foreign Islamic presence in Chechnya and undermining the overall structure of Chechen separatism as a whole.

A true apotheosis of Russia’s campaign against Chechen separatists, however, was the assassination of Shamil Basayev[78], which A. Alkhanov called the “logical conclusion of the difficult struggle against illegal armed formations, which was conducted by the special services, federal forces and law-enforcement agencies”[79].

It is noteworthy that even during the war against a common enemy, Maskhadov's and Basayev's factions failed to reconcile their differences, which stemmed from past political rivalry, different sources of domestic and international support and legitimacy, military tactics and, most importantly, different interpretations of Islamic governance.

Thus, opposing interpretations of Islam among the leaders of the Chechen separatism played an imperative role in Russia's ability to defeat Chechen resistance during the Second Chechen War and in its aftermath. In many ways, Islam served as a strong factor in the downfall of the Chechen separatists.

Russia's Wager on Traditional Islamists

At time of the military incursion, political power in Chechnya was gradually handed over to Kremlin-appointed administrators, whereas the policing functions were delegated to the Chechen police forces. Russian authorities engaged in considerable propaganda efforts in order to convince Russian citizens and the international community that life in Chechnya was normalized despite the continuing attacks by the remaining terrorists.

These freshly founded Chechen authorities played an important role in neutralizing the remaining separatist militants. The new governmental structure in Chechnya was slowly constructed in accordance with Kremlin's blueprints. In March 2003, a new constitution was approved via referendum. The new constitution put a legal end to separatist ambitions and affirmed Chechnya as an inextricable part of the Russian Federation. The referendum also paved the way for presidential elections in 2003, which resulted in the democratic affirmation of Ahmad Kadyrov's de facto leadership in Chechnya; Kadyrov was appointed three years earlier by the Federal Government. Grozny's representatives assumed official positions in Russia's institutions thereby indicating another milestone in Chechnya's gradual return into Russia's legal and political spheres.

In May 2004, President Kadyrov was killed in an explosion carried out by unknown perpetrators. Following his death, his son, Ramzan Kadyrov, quickly assumed the role as the most influential political actor in Chechnya. With Vladimir Putin's support, Ramzan Kadyrov was appointed Prime Minister under the new Kremlin-backed president, Alu Alkhanov.

In March 2007, Ramzan Kadyrov was elected president of Chechnya. He assumed control of (what remained of) Chechnya's oil industry and gained access to large sources of funding, directed from Moscow for the purpose of post-war economic reconstruction. In this context, the Russian government maintained that it was responsible for restoring the war-torn Chechen capital, Grozny, and for providing for general economic stability in Chechnya[80].

In no manner was Kadyrov's election an incident. Rather, it marked the successful implementation of Kremlin's policy of supporting the traditional-nationalist side of the Chechen political spectrum against the radical Islamist factions. As a proponent of the traditional form of Sufi Islam[81], Kadyrov enjoys considerable support among the Chechen population.

This policy is not new – in the past, Russian authorities supported the former First Secretary of the Chechen Autonomy, Doku Zavgayev[82], the infamous clan leader Ruslan Labazanov[83] and the former mayor of Grozny, Beslan Gantamirov[84]. Members of Yeltsin’s administration maintained connections with Dudayev. From time to time, Kremlin supported Maskhadov, who was regarded as an anti-Islamist and a trustworthy negotiator. Putin however, decided to refine the concept of Chechenization. Already in 2000, the former separatist Mufti, Ahmat-Haji Kadyrov, was pulled into the Russian sphere of influence. Kadyrov became the president of Chechnya in 2003. Ahmat-Hadji stated frankly that the war in Chechnya would not be over in at least twenty years, which was contrary to the numerous statements of Russian and Chechen officials regarding the swift resolution of the conflict. However, it was Kadyrov who managed to de-escalate the military conflict and to begin the cease-fire negotiations. In addition, Kadyrov reportedly despised Basayev and his Wahhabist surroundings[85]. The springboard for change has been constructed after Kremlin came to realize that the conflict could not be resolved by purely military methods. The term “Chechenization” emerged in Moscow to depict the need to allow Chechens to resolve their own inter-factional conflicts, while supporting the most favorable faction for Russia.

Today, the process of constitutional reconstruction in Chechnya is nearing completion. However, not all Russian analysts are convinced that Moscow’s current policy will ensure total stability in the republic, or that Ramzan Kadyrov is the optimal choice for Kremlin in Chechnya. Kadyrov is criticized for his lack of sophistication and experience. Few are convinced that Kadyrov, given a completely free hand, will avoid the temptation of seeking greater independence from Moscow.

Chechnya’s current loyalty to Moscow is based mostly on personal loyalty of local leaders and members of the Chechen elites. Russia reciprocates this loyalty through political privileges. In such an environment, there is a lack of grassroots integration of the republic into the legal, cultural and social environments of the Russian Federation.

It is still early, however, to state that Chechnya has become an oasis of peace and stability. Many of the positive developments remain superficial and short-term in essence.

Conclusion

While it remains clear that Islam was decisive in the foundation for Chechen separatism throughout the 1990s, the above analysis of the role of Islam in the Chechen conflict presents a combination of two distinct approaches:

In the first interpretation, Islam, while it did not serve as the main cause of the conflict, certainly contributed to the conflict’s longevity. Here, Huntington’s “Clash of Civilizations” model[86] is implied in the context of Chechnyan separatism. Initially popular among radical leftist publicists and a politically powerful group of former intelligence officers commonly referred to as “Siloviki”[87], this approach found its way into the intellectual mainstream and eventually

served as an important factor in justifying the continuation of Russian military presence in Chechnya.

The second approach presents Islam as no other than a tool in achieving pragmatic economic and political goals. In this view, religion in general primarily serves an instrumental purpose, albeit the very fact of its utilization is described as a key operational factor for Chechen separatism and for the competing factions within the Chechen socio-political system.

The third – far less congruent – approach views Islam in general as an entirely religious system, which remains separate from political interests and serves only as a peace-building force. Clearly, this approach is simply incompatible with the reality of the Chechen conflict. The image of Islam as completely disengaged from politics prevents us from understanding the true nature of the role of Islam in Chechnya, as well as in any other Muslim society.

These approaches leave considerable room for further nuances and interpretations. As witnessed in the above discussion, strong evidence suggests that the latter approach provides a valid framework for describing the failure of radical Islam in gaining decisive ground in Chechnya and the intricacies of internal political struggle between Maskhadov's government and the "Wahhabist" factions. However, only reconciliation between the two approaches provides a comprehensive description of the role of Islam in Chechen separatism since the beginning of the 1990's[88]. Maskhadov's and Wahhabists' usage of Islam for political purposes was thus a reactionary outcome of the First Chechen War – not a factor that in any way contributed to its beginning. This is best supported in a statement made by the first Chechen president, Djohar Dudayev, "Russia...compelled us to take the path of Islam"[89].

As previously discussed, Chechen interpretation of Islam historically possesses many unique traits that are at times incompatible with other types of Islam. It follows that the main contention between the Chechen factions was indeed among the lines of incompatibility of radical Jihadi-Salafi Islam with the local brand of Sufism[90]. While the political voices within Chechnya adhered to staunch Islamic rhetoric, factional tensions between the Wahhabi fundamentalists and mainstream Sufi Muslims increased throughout the late 1990s. Politically, the Wahhabists favored a traditional and independent Chechnya no more that they were able to accept Chechen autonomy within the confines of the Russian Federation. Their pursuit of an Islamic Caliphate in Caucasus could not be reconciled with Maskhadov's vision of an independent Chechen republic ruled by the unique principles of Chechen Sufism. This is why, following the outbreak of the Second Chechen War, this confrontation among religious-ideological lines prevented the "Wahhabi" warlords from pursuing full cooperation with Maskhadov[91]. Furthermore, some observers claim that the radical Salafi-Jihadi ideology contradicts the individualist nature of Chechen Islam. Thus, failure of the Salafi-Jihadi factions to create an Islamic state in Chechnya resulted primarily from resistance amongst the traditional Chechen population, and less so from the armed intervention by Russian forces[92].

Most observers agree that in the overall context of the Chechen conflict Islam – and especially radical Islam – played a negative role. While it began as a direct outcome of Russia's military reaction to Chechen separatist tendencies, Chechen appeal to Islam exacerbated the conflict and,

by welcoming the infiltration of foreign radical elements, led to further destabilization of the North Caucasus. Furthermore, Wahhabi presence in Chechnya contributed to, “construction of Modern Chechen identity and the fractionalization and radicalization of the separatist movement.”[93]

Overall, however, the vast majority of Chechens rejected the principles of Salafi-Jihadi Islam, which they viewed as alien and inherently incompatible with their cultural and religious traditions[94]. With low public support and impaired military and financial infrastructure, the “Wahhabists” have left Chechnya in order to seek the establishment of a Caliphate state from elsewhere in the Caucasus[95]. It is clear that the creation of a radical Islamic state in Chechnya is now a matter for historians, much rather than scholars interested in analyzing present and future developments.

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