

ISLAMIC EXTREMISM IN THE NORTH CAUCASUS: WHAT KIND OF THREAT FOR REGIONAL SECURITY?

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It is to Russia's advantage to portray its second military campaign in Chechnya as a fight against terrorism. This is especially so after 11 September, when international terrorism has become, not without reason, a Western obsession. But the fight in Chechnya is, above all, a fight against Islamic extremism and nationalism. Western countries do know, by now, what international terrorism can do to harm them and how serious a threat it can be. However, they seem ill prepared to evaluate what kind of threat Islamic extremism is. In Russia, it has been a security priority for many years. The Kremlin blames Islamic extremism for the second war in Chechnya and, for that matter, for nearly everything that has gone wrong in the region. Many in the West think that Russia is exaggerating the presence of Islamic fundamentalists in Chechnya and elsewhere in the North Caucasus in order to legitimise its military campaign. The events of 11 September have temporarily settled the matter, uniting Russia and the West in their common fight against terrorism and, although not explicitly, against Islamic extremism. However, before engaging in a particular line of action, it seems necessary to understand what factors lie behind the apparent success of Islamic extremism in the region. Islamic fundamentalism has arrived in the North Caucasus to stay. It has important external support, both financially and in terms of human resources. And it is closely connected with terrorists and bandits. A military approach is, therefore, unavoidable, but it should not be the only one. At some point, it should even be relegated to a secondary, backup role to other political and economic approaches.

Before the second Chechen war: armed incursions in Dagestan.

On 17 August 1998 the population of Karamakhi, Chabanmakhi, and Kadar, three villages in the Buinaksk district of Dagestan, the Northern Caucasus Russian federal republic, proclaimed the establishment of a liberated Islamic territory. They were led by members of the Dagestani Wahabi movement. In previous days the Karamakhi Wahabis had seized the militia station and expelled all militia men from the village. They had established fortified outposts along the village outskirts. The village subsequently refused to obey Russian federal authorities. The villages of Chabanmakhi and Kadar, also strongholds of Wahabism, followed suit. The People's Congress of Ichkeria [Chechnya] and Dagestan, presided by Shamil Basayev (Chechen field commander, and prime minister of the republic between November 1997 and July 1998), declared it was ready to render military support to the Dagestani rebels in the event that Russia decided to restore law and order by force. Federal authorities, however, tried to resolve the situation through negotiations with the Wahabis. Following talks, the rebels rescinded their declaration of independence, but retained control of the villages. They also retained their weapons. The so-called Islamic territory of Dagestan enjoyed a *de facto* independent status until the September 1999 invasion of Dagestan by Chechen fighters. The residents of these villages were governed by strict Islamic laws. The Wahabi rebellion remained contained within the geographical limits of Wahabi support in Dagestan.

On 7 August 1999 a group of approximately 1,500 armed men which included Chechens, Arabs, Central Asians and Dagestanis, entered Dagestan from Chechnya and seized some villages in the district of Botlikh. They were led by Shamil Basayev and Jordanian-born field

commander Khattab [some sources say Saudi-born]. This was meant to be the first step towards declaring the Republic of Dagestan an independent Islamic state comprising Chechnya and Dagestan. The incursion was the beginning of a 45-day war by Russian federal troops and Dagestani militia against Chechen Islamic extremists. After 3 weeks of fighting they were pushed back by Russian federal and Dagestani forces, ending the first stage of the armed conflict. Following this first withdrawal, Russian federal troops went on to disarm the Wahabi villages of the Buinaksk district, entering into clashes with the local dwellers. As the Russian troops bombarded these Islamic strongholds, the rebels from Chechnya invaded Dagestan for the second time on 5 September, in the region of Novolakskoye. The Russian federal troops, together with the Dagestani militia, finally repelled the invasion, also assuming federal control over the Islamic villages of the Buinaksk district. Russia's retaliation for Dagestan's invasion marked the beginning of the second Chechen war, still unfinished. According to analyst Alexei Malashenko, of the Moscow Carnegie Centre, even if pushed back into Chechnya, the rebels will come back again and again.

The expansion of Islamic fundamentalism and its destabilizing consequences in Chechnya and Dagestan.

Most of the population in the North Caucasus has historically been dominated by the Sufi form of Islam, which blended original pre-Muslim traditions with Islamic customs. The followers of Sufism join together in brotherhoods or orders (*tarikats*) consisting of hundreds of disciples (*murids*) who are entirely devoted to their *sheiks* (the orders' leaders). The two most important Sufi orders in the North Caucasus are the Qadiri and the Naqshbandi. Sufism was isolated from the rest of the Muslim world during Soviet times but managed to survive through the worst years of religious persecution. Perestroika unleashed the revival of traditional Islam in the North Caucasus. During the last decade, Sufism has been gaining more and more followers in this region. Currently there are more than 40 Sufi orders. This form of Islam acts within the laws of the country and is loyal to the regime and the state, rejecting violence as an unacceptable political method.

Perestroika also facilitated the arrival in the North Caucasus of missionaries from Islamic groups that were unknown to the local Muslims. Among these new movements was Wahabism, the doctrine of an Islamic reform movement founded by Muhammad ibn Abd al Wahhab in Saudi Arabia in the eighteenth century. Wahabis call themselves the followers of pure Islam and oppose all additions to Islam adopted by Muslims after the death of Mohammed. Wahabis deny the role of the teacher, which for the Sufi *tarikats* is very important. They also deny the cult of saints and pilgrimages to the shrines of saints, also a widespread practise in Sufism. According to Professor A. Ignatenko, of the International Eurasian Institute for Economic and Political Research, the interpretation of *jihad* by Wahabis and Sufis is completely different. Wahabis only follow one of the two meanings of *jihad*: the holy war to convert the infidels. The Sufis, on the contrary, give much more relevance to the second meaning of *jihad*: a war that the Muslim has to fight against his own defects in his attempt to reach perfection. For wahabism any legislative human activity is regarded as infidelity. According to Wahabis, only complete obedience to the Wahabi group and active hostility towards everyone who does not belong to it can show the man to be a pure Muslim. Implicit in the principles of Wahabism is a high potential for violent political action. In secular Muslim countries, under specific circumstances (weak central state, repressive and unpopular regimes, war...), Wahabi movements may seek to overthrow the political regime or to ensure Muslim's self-determination through violent actions in order to establish an Islamic state organized around the Sharia. The cases in the North Caucasus and Central Asia are paradigmatic.

Both in Chechnya and Dagestan the Wahabi or Wahabi-inspired Islamic messages are closely intertwined with political efforts to separate these republics from the Russian Federation. The aim is to establish an Islamic state that would also eventually include all the Caucasian

peoples: Ingushetia, Balkariya, Karachaevo-Cherkessia and Azerbaijan. In Chechnya, this union of religious and nationalist appeals has been more successful than in Dagestan. Chechnya wants to secede from the Russian Federation and this is what the Maskhadov leadership (Aslan Maskhadov was elected president of the Chechen republic on 27 January 1997) and the Islamic extremists have in common. More precisely, it is they who want to secede. What the population really wants is not at all clear given the deep split that divides Chechen society around this issue. This desire for secession is also what makes cooperation between federal and Chechen forces against Islamic fundamentalism so difficult and so unlikely in the present circumstances. The support of the Wahabis for the Chechen forces in the first war against Russia strengthened their position in the republic, allowing them to enter the Chechen administration. However, despite sharing a common goal and, for some time, even a common strategy, already in 1998 there were signs of trouble for the Wahabis in Chechnya. Their cosy relationship with the Maskhadov regime began to crumble due to pressure on Maskhadov from the Sufi Islamic establishment. Wahabi missionaries and groups encountered strong opposition from both local religious authorities and parts of the population. The Sufi *tarikats* severely criticized president Maskhadov in the aftermath of the first Chechen war for his ambiguous stand towards Wahabism. Sufi *tarikats* declared that the Wahabis should be expelled from Chechnya. This line was persistently defended by the Mufti (leading cleric) of Chechnya, A. Kadirov. In July 1998, in the Chechen city of Gudermes, massive fights arose between the Wahabis and the *murids*, which led to the killing of over one hundred Wahabis. With the Wahabis defeated, the Chechen leadership ordered Khattab to close his training camps and to leave Chechnya. Khattab ignored the order. Instead, the Wahabis concentrated in the town of Urus-Martan, transforming it into their stronghold. Khattab established an alliance with Shamil Basayev. Financial support from abroad allowed them to function autonomously. Subsequently, they avoided direct violent clashes with the Islamic establishment of Chechnya, though they did not give up their religious and political crusade. It was immediately after these events that they attempted the armed incursions in Dagestan. The Maskhadov government, for its part, was quick to announce that the Chechen administration had nothing to do with the incursions.

Dagestan, unlike Chechnya, does not want to secede from the Russian Federation, for reasons that, however relevant, are beyond the scope of this report. Nor do the other Northern Caucasus Russian republics: North Ossetia, Ingushetia, Karachaevo-Cherkessia, Kabardino-Balkariya, Adygeya. Wahabis, and other extremist groups inspired by their principles and teachings, are trying to establish themselves in these republics but, so far, the Dagestani scenario has repeated itself. Sufi *tarikats* in Dagestan oppose the establishment of Wahabism within their religious domains. According to different reports, violent clashes between Wahabis and *murids* became almost a regular event in the late 1990s in Dagestan. This is not very different from events in Chechnya. Many analysts believe that the reason why Wahabism has failed in Dagestan, as opposed to its success in Chechnya, lies in the extremely heterogeneous ethnic composition of Dagestani society, with 14 major ethnic groups and many other minor ones. Wahabism cuts across ethnic allegiances, being supported by some Dagestani ethnic groups (mostly from Chechen-Akkins, Avars and Dargins) and rejected by the rest. And yet the ethnic divide is still the most salient in Dagestani society. This explanation, however, is clearly unsatisfactory. The greater homogeneity of Chechnya (as compared to Dagestan) is only relative. Society is also divided across political lines, between supporters of secession and supporters of remaining in Russia. Chechnya is an Islamic state, run by the Sharia, whereas Dagestan is a secular state. This inevitably has made things easier for Wahabis in Chechnya. The success story of Wahabism in Chechnya has depended very much on the evolution of political forces in the republic. Wahabism influence in Chechnya was facilitated by the ambiguity, sometimes even support, it received from the Maskhadov leadership, before they fell apart. This was never the case in Dagestan. There are also different political regimes in Chechnya and Dagestan. The Dagestan regime is a democratising polity backed by a successful record of having prevented ethnic conflict despite a potentially explosive ethnic structure. Chechnya is a failed state, and a

failed regime, perfect terrain for extremism to take root. Finally, the fact that Wahabism is now outlawed both in Chechnya and Dagestan (also in Ingushetia) cannot be considered a successful record for Chechen Wahabism as opposed to Wahabism in Dagestan. Wahabis now operate secretly and they are involved in a variety of clandestine activities. Whether this will be a source of weakness or strength remains to be seen.

The political consequences of the spread of Islamic extremism in the North Caucasus speak for themselves. A second Chechen war is still going on between the Russian federal forces and Chechen separatists, among them the Wahabis. Chechnya has lost the *de facto* independent status it had enjoyed between 1996 and 1999. There is now an interim administration imposed from the Kremlin in 2000, headed by the ex-Mufti and, therefore, religious leader of Sufism, Akhmed Kadirov. The Maskhadov regime is now a parallel regime unrecognised by Russia. Chechen separatists are internally divided between the Islamic extremists, the pro-independent Muslim Chechens and the traditional Islamic authorities with various positions towards Chechen independence. There is an ongoing process of religious radicalisation, partly encouraged by the Russian strategy of using the traditional Islamic structures and leaders against the Islamic extremists. In Dagestan this is accompanied by a reinforcement of ethnic cleavages.

Conclusion

It would be wrong to attribute the above enumeration of events only to the spread of Islamic extremism. Wahabis are not a threat by themselves but in combination with other factors already mentioned: weak central states, poverty, unemployment, corrupt political regimes, repression, terrorism and enduring war. We must not forget that Wahabism gains its supporters among young men who are alienated from social, political and economic establishments. In different circumstances, Wahabis could be no more than a marginalized clandestine group without the necessary influence and strength to destabilize a whole region. Events like the 11 September terrorist attacks and the death of field commander Khattab by Russian federal forces a few weeks ago may contribute to weakening the conditions for the further development of Islamic extremism in the region. But the factors just mentioned still play very much in its favour. External financial support is still there, nurturing their activities. And the region is full of situations that serve as potential causes for the Wahabis to defend (corrupt regimes, territorial demands by ethnic minorities, economic inequalities). In these circumstances, those who claim that the Islamic extremist threat is being overstated in Russia could be terribly wrong. The most likely scenario in the North Caucasus is a continuation of the Islamic extremists' activities. A politico-religious crusade of the type defended by Wahabism is not likely to be abandoned when facing persecution, repression or military attack. Their present underground status may reinforce further their links with terrorist and bandit groups. Their dynamics and strategies will probably change and adapt to the new circumstances.

A military response is therefore necessary but insufficient if not accompanied by other economic and political measures. The USA's blunt strategy of providing military aid and support in Central Asia is mainly serving to reinforce the corrupt and autocratic political regimes in their repressive stand against Islamic movements. Russia has to combine a military approach with a political and social one. It has to fight the extremists but, simultaneously, cut their financial and human supplies, undermine their social basis of support and deprive them of causes to fight for. And it is here where the EU should make its biggest contribution in helping Russia.