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Evolving Threats, Challenges, and Prospects

A Report of the CSIS Russia and Eurasia Program

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# RADICAL ISLAM IN THE NORTH CAUCASUS

EVOLVING THREATS, CHALLENGES, AND PROSPECTS

*Sergey Markedonov*<sup>1</sup>

As Kyrgyzstan plunges into crisis and the threat of a second Afghanistan in Central Asia looms large, the situation in the “Big Caucasus” seems less pressing and thus overshadowed.<sup>2</sup> The worst scenarios predicted by analysts and politicians for the period after the 2008 August war have not been realized. The Russian attempt to “replace the regime” of Mikhail Saakashvili or apply the Georgian pattern in Ukraine, expected by many in the West, has not taken place. Neither have the attempts from the West (the United States, NATO, and others) to “nudge Georgia into a rematch,” which were expected in Moscow. Nonetheless, the Caucasus region remains one of the most vulnerable spaces in Eurasia. In the Caucasus region, the first precedent of a revision of borders between the former Soviet republics was established. For the first time in Eurasia, and particularly in the Caucasus, partially recognized states have emerged. While their independence is denied by the United Nations, it is recognized by the Russian Federation, a permanent member of the UN Security Council. After the “hot August” of 2008, Moscow demonstrated its willingness to play the role of a revisionist state for the first time since 1991. Russia defines the “Big Caucasus” as the sphere of its vital interests and priorities and consequently pretends to be a key stakeholder for the whole region.

But there is a great paradox in this situation. Identifying itself as a guarantor of Caucasus stability and security, Russia faces serious challenges inside its own country in the North Caucasus area. Moreover, in 2009 the situation there was characterized as the most important domestic policy issue by President Dmitry Medvedev in the Presidential Message to the Federal Assembly.<sup>3</sup> As a result, the Kremlin and the federal government brought in an official post—special plenipotentiary—with broadened functions in the newly created North Caucasus Federal District. For the first time in the Russia’s post-Soviet history, this official has the rank of the deputy prime minister.

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<sup>1</sup> Sergey Markedonov is a visiting fellow with the Russia and Eurasia Program at CSIS. The Russia and Eurasia Program is grateful to the Carnegie Corporation of New York for its support of the visiting scholar program and the policy paper series connected with it.

<sup>2</sup> The term “Big Caucasus” is here understood to mean Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, de-facto entities of the region, and the North Caucasus republics of the Russian Federation.

<sup>3</sup> Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly, The Kremlin, November 12, 2009, <http://www.kremlin.ru/transcripts/5979>.

But what challenges have turned the North Caucasus into a primary issue for Russia? Could we paint the political, ideological, and psychological portrait of the North Caucasus militant resistance? What resources do they have, and why has radicalism become popular? What external and internal factors determine their approaches? What mistakes did Russia, its society, and the Western observers make? And, finally, could the rise of Islamist militancy in the North Caucasus bring Moscow and Washington closer, regardless of the numerous foreign policy disputes existing between the two countries? These are the basic questions prompted by the events of recent years. This report is an attempt to answer the above-mentioned questions.<sup>4</sup> It is based on open sources and interviews made during several trips to the North Caucasus republics. Given the risk to our sources, some of them are cited anonymously. Nevertheless, the derived information gives specific insights into current political trends in the Caucasus, which in turn can promote more practical approaches and adequate decisionmaking.

## The Caucasus Shift: From Ethnic Nationalism to Islamic “Revival”

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, ethnic separatism in the Russian Caucasus was a particularly topical issue for a long period of time. The landmarks of this struggle have been two military campaigns in Chechnya (1994–1996 and 1999–2000) and the Ossetia-Ingushetia conflict (1992), which has not been fully settled yet. The existence of the de facto state of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria (lasting for a total of six years) put the political and military presence of the Russian Federation in the North Caucasus into question. In the early and mid-1990s, apart from Chechen separatism, other ethno-nationalist movements in the North Caucasus were also brandishing the idea of “self-determination up to secession.” At the same time, the Caucasian separatists put forward projects of secession not only from Russia, but also from the republics in which given ethnic groups’ representatives were included. There were irredentist projects as well (for example, creation of a unified Lezgistan on the territories of Azerbaijan and Russian Dagestan). For instance, in Dagestan, the largest North Caucasian republic, the Party of Independence and Revival of Dagestan was active in the early 1990s. In Karachay-Circassia, in 1991 alone, five entities proclaimed themselves independent (including two Cossack ones). In Kabardino-Balkaria, in 1991–1992 and again in 1996, an intensive process of division of the republic along ethnic lines was undertaken, with appropriate polls, the organization of a referendum, and “land delimitation.” The Confederation of the Caucasus Highland Peoples was also actively promoting the idea of a “Common Caucasian Home”—naturally, without Russian input.

Thus, Chechnya was simply the most remarkable example of ethnic separatism. The other separatist and irredentist projects have not developed into open confrontations. However, over

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<sup>4</sup> For basic ideas of this text, see Sergey Markedonov, “The Caucasian Cauldron,” *Journal of International Security Affairs* (Fall 2010).

the past two decades, Russia also had to address challenges such as a legislative “isolation” of Adygeya (where in the early 1990s a specific period of residence and an obligatory knowledge of the Adygeyan language were introduced as qualifying eligibility criteria for the Republic’s Head candidates), the attempts to divide Kabardino-Balkaria and Karachay-Circassia along ethnic lines, and the exodus of the Russian population from the entire North Caucasian territory.

The popularity of ethnic nationalism reached its peak in the first half of the 1990s. The rise of ethnic nationalism in the early 1990s was fuelled not only by the “weakness of the state,” but also by objective circumstances. First, the disintegration of any imperial or quasi-imperial state is accompanied and accelerated by a quest for the “roots” of the constituent parts that will lead to new identities being forged. Second, the republics of the North Caucasus within the Russian Federation had been part of the Soviet state for 70 years. It contributed to both the establishment of state atheism and the legal institutionalization of ethnicity. Religiousness was prohibited, while ethnicity was cultivated. In the beginning of the 1990s, there were simply no skillful preachers of “pure Islam” in the region. This is why in the early 1990s the movement of Islamic “radicals” emerged in the North Caucasus, in an effort to combine religious rhetoric with ethnic nationalism.

The spread of militant Islam across the North Caucasus is explained by Russia’s policy of extreme centralization during Vladimir Putin’s first presidential term (2000–2004). Naturally, he gained his giant popularity due to his brutal rhetoric and practical approaches.<sup>5</sup> However, Putin’s personal role in the complicated and controversial ideological and political shift should not be overestimated since the shift started to occur even before his presidency. Moreover, the rise of Islamic radicalism across the whole of the North Caucasus was only indirectly connected with Chechnya and its fight against the federal center. The first strikes between Sufi Muslims and Salafites in Dagestan were registered in 1994–1995. Already in 1997, the Sufi Islam supporters of Dagestan demanded to prohibit any Salafite activity. In December 1997, the People’s Assembly of Dagestan adopted some amendments to the republican law “On the Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations” to restrict public activity of Salafi Muslims.<sup>6</sup> In 1998, the Islamic radicals attempted a coup in Makhachkala and proclaimed the “Special Islamic Territory” in the area of three Dagestani settlements later that year. Thus, it is not accidental that Chechen jihadists, such as Shamil Basayev and Ibn ul-Khattab, chose Dagestan as the weakest link in Russia’s republics and the target for their infamous fall 1999 raids.

In time, the popularity of ethnic nationalism and ethnic separatism started to falter and decline because of different reasons. First of all, it is necessary to point out that the persistent ethnic nationalism (and separatism as its ultimate phase) is fraught with conflicts. Many such conflicts

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<sup>5</sup> Zeyno Baran, S. Frederick Starr, and Svante Cornell, “Islamic Radicalism in Central Asia and the Caucasus: Implications for the EU,” Silk Road Paper, Central Asia–Caucasus Institute/Silk Road Studies Program, July 2006, pp. 41–42, <http://www.silkroadstudies.org/new/docs/Silkroadpapers/0607Islam.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> Author’s interview in Makhachkala (Dagestan, Russia), June 20, 2006.

broke out in the 1990s: the Ossetian-Ingush and Russian-Chechen conflicts were the most violent ones and, therefore, the most salient. Ethnic nationalism failed to solve a number of urgent problems faced by the ethnic elites (in particular, it did not fulfill their hopes of territorial rehabilitation). The ethnic elites that then came to power also engaged in the privatization of political power and property, brushing aside their pledges to be the representatives of “their people.” The popularity of ethnic nationalism and separatism also waned because of the failure of the “Ichkeria” state experiment. The latter should not be put down to the Russian military intervention (although this move forced many to weigh the costs of secession). They failed to build up an effective state in de facto independent Chechnya (at least comparable with Abkhazia and Nagorno Karabakh). Moreover, Ichkeria under Dudaev and Maskhadov acted very aggressively toward its neighbor republics. It created an image of the Russian state as less evil than “free Ichkeria.” In the mid 1990s, a radical Islamist environment was being shaped in the North Caucasus, where a new project, “Pure Islam,” was developed, which was different from the Soviet experience, failed processes of democratization, or ethnic nationalism.

This project gained massive popularity not because of the illiteracy of the local population or their alleged native “provincialism.” The radical Islamists invoked a world religion (free from local “distortions” and traditions) and universal values (beyond ethnic groups, wirts, tarikats,<sup>7</sup> clans). It was equated to egalitarianism, the fight against corruption, and social injustice. Nadir Khachilayev in his address to the Dagestani people and Dagestani jamaats in the late 1990s said: “In Dagestan the scale of state robbery and personal enrichment of officials has not been so great as now... Never before as nowadays rights of rank-in-file people have been violated... I see only one legal instance—Shariah.”<sup>8</sup>

The ideologists of “pure Islam” also skillfully used psychological methods of influence—appealing to disenchanting sections of the young population who were deprived of opportunities for career growth or quality education. All these things were shaped in the conditions of a lack of any exact social, economic, or political development of the North Caucasus. In the post-Soviet period, the Caucasus has become the region with the highest level of unemployment and poverty. In Chechnya in 2006–2008, the number of unemployed was estimated to be between 300,000 and 330,000 people. While the average all-Russia rate was 7.3 percent unemployed in 2006 and 6.1 percent in 2007, in the Caucasus the unemployment rate was 13.7 percent and 11.7 percent

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<sup>7</sup> Wirts and tarikats are Islamic Sufi orders.

<sup>8</sup> Khachilayev Nadir (1958–2003) is Russian political and religious figure, deputy of the Federal Assembly of Russia (1995–1999, the second convocation). He was a chairman of the Russian Muslims’ Union, which was recognized illegal by the Russian Ministry of Justice. He was accused by the Dagestani Prosecutor’s Office in the terrorist attack preparations (2002) and was killed as a result of encroachment. His words are cited in Alexei Malashenko, *Islamskiye orientiry Severnogo Kavkaza* [Islamic Guidelines for the North Caucasus] (Moscow: M. Gendal’f Publ. House, 2001), p. 57.

respectively.<sup>9</sup> According to unofficial data 70 to 80 percent of young people of the region (who are younger than 30) are unemployed. At the same time, the level of the shadow economy in North Ossetia was 80 percent, in Ingushetia 87 percent, and in Dagestan 75 percent, respectively. Simultaneously those republics are at the top of the most subsidized constituencies of the Russian Federation. In 2004, the Russian state lost 50 billion rubles to the shadow economy, though financial aid to the Caucasus republics was estimated at 47 billion rubles.<sup>10</sup> The radical Islamists also have claimed moral superiority. So Igor Rotar', the well-known Russian journalist, quoted in his book the words of one inhabitant of the Dagestani settlement Karamakhi who participated in the "Special Islamic Territory" foundation in 1998: "We don't drink [alcohol], and we work hard as a real Muslims..."<sup>11</sup>

As a result, radical Islam started to spread not only across the eastern part of the region (i.e., Chechnya, Dagestan, Ingushetia), but also across its western part, where the religiousness of the population had traditionally been less strong. The tragic events that took place in the capital of Kabardino-Balkaria on October 13, 2005, were a product of this development. The 2005 Nalchik attack was a raid by a large group of militants. A number of buildings associated with the Russian security forces were targeted. More than 100 people (142 according to official tallies), including at least 14 civilians, were reported to have been killed during the ensuing shootout, which continued into the next day. Many people were wounded. Famous Caucasian warlord Shamil Basayev subsequently claimed responsibility for the attack. It was the first full-scale raid after the Soviet collapse, appealing not to Chechen independence but to Islamic jihad. The alleged Department of Strategic Information of the Kavkaz Center Web site, the Internet agency of the Caucasus jihadists,<sup>12</sup> characterized this action as combat between "Mujahideen" (not freedom fighters!) and both "the Kafirs (Russians) and Munafiqs (local Russia's authorities) labeled as "traitors."<sup>13</sup>

The current instability in Ingushetia, Chechnya, or Dagestan must not be viewed as a manifestation of ethnic nationalism or separatism. Since the Beslan tragedy in September 2004,

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<sup>9</sup> All statistics are from the statistics collections of the Russian State Committee on the Statistics Affairs. See appropriate chapters at <http://www.gks.ru>.

<sup>10</sup> See Alla Yaz'kova and Sergey Markedonov, *Severnyi Kavkaz: Sotsial'no-ekonomicheskiye I politicheskiye fakroty sovremennykh krizisov v natsional'nykh respublikah* [The North Caucasus: social-economic and political factors of contemporary crises in the national republics] (Moscow: Institute of Economy, Russian Academy of Science, 2009), pp. 6–9.

<sup>11</sup> Cited in Igor' Rotar', *Islam I voina* [Islam and War] (Moscow: AIRO-XX, 1999), p. 30.

<sup>12</sup> Originally "Kavkaz Center" was founded in March 1999 as a Chechen "independent, international, and Islamic Internet agency." It represented the viewpoint of the Chechen separatists, but subsequently it transformed to a Web resource for militant Islamists publishing materials in the Arabic, English, Russian, Turkish, and Ukrainian languages. This Web site has a consistent anti-Western orientation. For example, U.S. and UK troops in Afghanistan are called "occupants" and "enemies." See <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/russ/content/2010/11/01/76223.shtml>.

<sup>13</sup> "Units of the Caucasus Front Enter Nalchik," October 13, 2005, <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/eng/content/2005/10/13/4146.shtml>.



the main anti-Russian statements on the North Caucasus have been made not under slogans of ethno-political self-determination, but under a green flag of radical Islam. On October 31, 2007, Doku Umarov, the president of the so-called Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, relieved himself of his duties as head of that separatist state and inaugurated a new entity, the “Caucasus Emirate.” Umarov pronounced himself “the only legal authority over all territories where there are mujahideen.” He also announced that he was disavowing all laws of the secular authorities in the North Caucasus. He went on to declare that “ethnic and colonial zones known as ‘North Caucasus republics’ are outside the law.”<sup>14</sup> At the same time, the lack of powerful centers of ethnic nationalism in the Caucasus today is no ground for complacency. Islamic religious radicalism (especially when it is on the rise) is not a less dangerous challenge but a challenge, creating a qualitatively different set of problems.

## Radical Islamists in the North Caucasus: A Collective Portrait

Any attempts to make generalizations about Islamic radicals in the North Caucasus face methodological difficulties. Those problems are not compounded only by ambiguities in the terms “Islamism,” “militant Islam,” or “radical Muslims”; it is also necessary to note that those who consider themselves defenders of “pure Islam” or “real Islam” (sharing the Salafites approaches) do not constitute such a homogeneous group as one might expect. In the Russian mass media or in the politicians’ discourse, they are labeled as “Wahhabis.” But who is a Wahhabi? Even phrasing the question this way seems awkward. In Russian society, in people’s mass consciousness, and even among experts, the concept of “Wahhabism” has long been associated with extremism and terrorist activity. “Wahhabism is a nontraditional trend in Islam,” said Magomedali Magomedov, former head of Dagestan’s State Council. Ruslan Khasbulatov, former chairman of Russia’s Supreme Council, defines Wahhabism as “religious sectarianism.” “All that is ignorant in Islam” makes up Wahhabism, according to Ramazan Abdulatipov, a Russian diplomat and scholar.<sup>15</sup> Among the critics of Wahhabism in the republics of the North Caucasus, a special word arose—“Wahhabist”—which rhymes with “terrorist.”

However, after a more extensive scrutiny of the specific features of Caucasian Islam, as well as Islam as a faith in general, it is obvious that the very definition of Wahhabism and the derivative notion of the Wahhabi are not just inadequate, but simply incorrect, in both the academic and the applied sense of the terms. The people who advocate Wahhabism never defined themselves as Wahhabis, considering the term a pejorative nickname and a label imposed by the intelligence services. The word “al-Wahhabiya” derives from Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, the founder of

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<sup>14</sup> Statement by Amir Dokka Umarov about the Declaration of the Caucasus Emirate (07.10.2007), <http://caucasus.wordpress.com/2007/12/02/the-statement-by-amir-dokka-umarov-about-the-declaration-of-the-caucasus-emirate-07102007/>.

<sup>15</sup> Malashenko, *Islamskiye orientiry Severnogo Kavkaza* [Islamic Guidelines for the North Caucasus], p. 54.

a conservative branch of Islam who was born in 1703 in Najd, in the central part of today's Saudi Arabia. His teachings later became the official ideology of the Saudi state. It is worth noting that the followers of al-Wahhab never called themselves Wahhabis. To identify themselves with the name of a single person would be to fall into the sin of idol worship. His followers called themselves "monotheists" (*muwahhidun*) and adherents of the original, pure Islam, or "those who follow the way of the predecessors" (*salafiyeen*) or Salafites. Wahhabi was the term used by the group's adversaries even during the life of Abd al-Wahhab.

Meanwhile, as was noted by ethnologist Ahmet Yarlykapov:

Not all radical fundamentalist ideas spread today in the Muslim world should be ascribed to classical Wahhabism. This term defines a wide range of radical-fundamentalist approaches to interpreting the teachings of Islam. These approaches receive their fullest and most systematic treatment in the works of Ibn Taymiyah and al-Wahhab himself. The optimal definition of contemporary Russian-Caucasian Wahhabism would consider it a regional variant of Salafism, a trend in Islam not identified with official authorities or clan structures.<sup>16</sup>

The activities of today's Russian-Caucasian Salafites clearly include an element of extremism. As a rule, Salafites in Russia are the ones who organize and carry out terrorist acts.

At the same time, to consider Doku Umarov and his confederates Islamists, in the complete sense of the word, is problematic. They lack the requisite theological preparation and in some cases even the most basic education. As the Russian Orientalist Sergei Davydov has rightly noted, "the leaders of the Algerian jihad knew at the very least how to write a sermon; the flagrant ignorance of the authors of certain North Caucasus Islamist Web sites has already been subject to the cruelest derision on the part of their opponents." For such laughable spelling mistakes and attempts to welcome unknown "scholars" of the titular prophet Muhammad, says Davydov, "even a village mullah in Iran or Turkey would be sent back to retrain."<sup>17</sup> That may be, but the ideals of "pure Islam" underlie the antigovernment protests of these unschooled Islamists. With the help of these ideals, they have managed with a certain effectiveness to mobilize the extremist potential in the area. Meanwhile, next in line after Umarov, who is not overly versed in theology, are prepared preachers who meet the standards of the mujahideen of the future—literate theologians who know how to use both TNT and a Kalashnikov. Said Buryatskiy (1982–2010), Anzor Astemirov (1976–2010), and Arthur (Musa) Mukozhev (1966–2009) are brilliant examples of this type of Islamic radical. Naturally, among the Caucasus Islamic radicals there are people who have committed crimes; others consider "pure Islam" a fashion or affectation; while some people have

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<sup>16</sup> Akhmet Yarlykapov, "Wahhabism na Severnom Kavkaze" [Wahhabism in the North Caucasus], in *Social'no-politicheskaya situatsiua na Kavkaze* [Social-Political Situation on the Caucasus] (Moscow: M. Institut Politicheskogo I Voennogo Analiza, 2001), p. 156.

<sup>17</sup> Sergey Davydov, "Uroki Alzhira" [The Algerian lessons], *Genezis conflicta* [The conflict genesis], March 20, 2008, <http://www.caucasustimes.com/article.asp?id=13769>.

been disoriented or have just lost their path. At any rate, it might be a big political mistake to dismiss them all as being alike.

It would be also highly incorrect to simply equate terrorism with Salafism. Former Chechen president Dzhokhar Dudayev, the founder of “independent Ichkeria,” never associated himself with Salafism. On the contrary, he belonged to the “traditional” *tarikats* (Sufi order) Kadiriya. Akhmad Kadyrov, another former Chechen president and a well-known opponent of the Salafites, belonged to the same *tarikats*, which did not prevent him from declaring jihad against Russia in 1995. Sufi religious authorities made a considerable contribution to the advance of separatist, Islamist, and anti-Russian feelings in Chechnya. Nor was Aslan Maskhadov, who became president of Chechnya following Dudayev’s assassination, connected to the Salafites. There are also known instances when advocates of the Salafites spoke out in favor of loyalty to the Russian state.

Nevertheless, the different groups and leaders of the North Caucasus Salafites all have some significant features that give us the opportunity to weigh in on their basic ideological and political values. First of all their radical Islamist background (regardless of educational level) is always signified by a degree of extremism. Appealing to “pure Islam” stresses their unreadiness to have to deal with Russian power. The Caucasus militant Muslims try to be separated from ethnic nationalists who are ready for compromises (like former separatist rebels in Chechnya). It’s rather problematic to consider them to be participants of real “global jihad.” But the Caucasus radicals are eager to represent themselves as the part of the “Global Islamic Movement.” Umarov and his comrades-in-arms classify their fight in the North Caucasus in this context: “We are an integral part of the Islamic world... Today in Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia and Palestine our brothers are fighting. Anyone who attacks a Muslim anywhere is our enemy, our common enemy,” Umarov said.<sup>18</sup> Given this, it is entirely understandable why Umarov sees the United States, Russia, and Europe as enemies. And, if Umarov and his confederates lack the resources for actions against the West, Russian citizens in Moscow, Kizlyar, and Nazran have already felt the practical consequences of the shift from ethnic nationalism to a defense of “pure Islam.”

Anti-Semitism is a compulsory element of all North Caucasus Islamic radicals’ proclamations. One of the leaflets of the Dagestani Salafites states: “Showing off, flaunting—that’s a Judaic method. Jews have succeeded in their skill of destroying peoples with the help of feminine temptation and charm.” Another self-published brochure of the Caucasian Islamists entitled “Interpreting the Majestic Koran” reads: “Studying the historical past of the Jews has led Muslims to believe that we cannot rest our hopes on the people whose history consists of such events. During the long centuries this nation has deterred and deteriorated.”<sup>19</sup> Many ideological directives of Arabic Muslim radicals are successfully functioning in the North Caucasus.

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<sup>18</sup>Andrei Smirnov, “Is the Caucasian Emirate a Threat to the Western World?”  
[http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no\\_cache=1&tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=4596](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=4596).

<sup>19</sup> Author’s interview in Cherkessk (Karachay-Circassia, Russia), April 17, 2007.

Consequently, external impact on the regional versions of militant Islam raises an important question on the correlation between radical Islamist trends and the Caucasus interpretations of them.

## Strangers in the Night: Foreign Traces of the Caucasus Jihad

In order to adequately evaluate external influences on the Caucasus Islamic radicalism phenomenon, it is necessary to propose several important theses. First of all, the Arab nations never had any common policy toward the Russian Caucasus. Additionally, such a common stance is not even possible in principle since there is a lack of political and confessional unity inside the Arab world itself. Second, many Arab states—including Syria, Egypt, and the Palestinian Authority—have been and continue to be interested in activating and increasing Russia’s role in the Middle East peace process. Given this situation, an internal weakening of Russia could not have been one of their goals or objectives. Third, it is necessary to clearly separate the official positions of Arab states and those of representatives of local societies that are more subject to radical Islam and fundamentalist network structures. For example, there is a numerous and politically influential Caucasian diaspora made up mostly of Adygs and Chechens in Jordan, and many of its representatives openly expressed their sympathy for the unacknowledged Chechen Republic of Ichkeria in the mid-1990s. However, Jordanian diplomats explicitly and plainly stated that the Hashemite Kingdom opposes terrorism and under no circumstances does it interfere with the affairs of other states. As another example, officially, Cairo took a pro-Moscow stand during the conflicts in the Caucasus, while North Caucasian Islamists considered a work on jihad by an Egyptian fundamentalist, Sayyid Qutb, as their handbook and manual. In 1998–1999, the pamphlet “Our struggle or Imam’s Insurgent Army” by Magomed Tagayev published in Kyiv, Ukraine, was widely distributed in Dagestan.<sup>20</sup> The pamphlet was an interpretation (on the Caucasus ground) of Qutb’s views.<sup>21</sup>

In the end, not one Arab country acknowledged the independence of Chechnya or of the “Special Islamic territory” (the Kadar zone) in Dagestan, although Chechen delegations were officially received in the United Arab Emirates and in Qatar. Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev, the second president of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, actually found his last refuge in Qatar. He was granted refugee status there in 2000, “without the right to carry out political activity”; he was killed in Doha in 2004. With the disappearance of the de-facto independent Chechen state and the lack of any authoritative infrastructure outside of the Russian government today, support for Caucasian Islamists seems even more problematic. This is especially true since the position of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) on Chechnya was always rather passive.

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<sup>20</sup> Mahomed Tagayev, *Nasha bor’ba ili Povstancheskaya Armiya Imama* [Our struggle or Imam’s Insurgent Army] (Kyiv: Наша борьба, или повстанческая армия имама, 1997).

<sup>21</sup> Author’s interview in Makhachkala (Dagestan, Russia), June 20, 2006.

By contrast, much greater support has come from Islamists in East and Central Asia (the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Hizb ut-Tahrir in much less degree).<sup>22</sup> As Akhmet Yarlykapov, a Russian expert on Islam, points out, Salafist ideas were spread in the Neftekumsk district of the Stavropol region as a result of vigorous activity by Sayyid-mullah, a citizen of Uzbekistan.<sup>23</sup> And while preachers from Arab countries accentuate the ideological sphere, Pakistani champions for “purity of Islam” stress the practical side—armed jihad. Incidentally, the officially unrecognized Chechnya was demonstratively acknowledged not by Iraq or by Syria, but by the so-called Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, ruled by the Taliban. At the same time, any attempts to make generalizations about foreign Islamic radicals in the North Caucasus face difficulties. The foreign Islamist preachers very frequently represent themselves personally and not by any organizations or structures. In some cases their aims and mentality are vastly different from the Caucasian “co-believers.” For example, unsuccessful attempts of Hizb ut-Tahrir to proselytize in the North Caucasus could be explained by different approaches to the ethnic factor among the Central Asian ideologists and Caucasian Islamists (the latter being more tolerant of the ethnic markers). It is not an accident that most of the criminal processes connected with Hizb ut-Tahrir’s activities took place not in the Caucasus but in the Volga region, Siberia, and Central parts of Russia.<sup>24</sup>

The al Qaeda factor in Caucasus Islamist activity is a subject of special interest. On the one hand, the Russian Public Prosecutor’s Office or different law enforcement agencies could not prove that any of the terrorist attacks or operations in this region were directly led by al Qaeda. Al Qaeda leaders did not proclaim the Caucasus as the “new battlefield of jihad” after Afghanistan and Iraq. But at the same time, the Caucasus is in al Qaeda’s sphere of attention. Videocassettes regarding Caucasus terrorism activity were found both in Iraq and Afghanistan among the Islamist fighters. Moreover, some al Qaeda representatives organized financial and ideological aid, as well as fighting operations in Dagestan and Chechnya. From 1995 to November 2005, these activities were championed by al Qaeda member Abu Omar al-Seif (born in 1968 in Saudi Arabia and killed in Dagestan in December 2005).<sup>25</sup> Subsequently, a similar role was played by Abu Hafs al-Urduni (born in 1973 in Jordan and killed in November 2006 in Dagestan). In his interview with the Kavkaz Center Web site, al-Urduni, he sympathized with al Qaeda and Osama bin Laden,

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<sup>22</sup> For more on HuT’s regional activities, see Tyler Rauert, “The Next Threat From Central Asia,” *Journal of International Security Affairs* 9 (Fall 2005). For more on the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, see Aleksei Malashenko and Martha Brill Olcott, “Islam na postsovetском prostranstve: vzglyad iznutri [Islam in the Post-Soviet Space: The view from the inside], Carnegie Moscow Center, 2001.

<sup>23</sup> Yarlykapov, “Wahhabism na Severnom Kavkaze,” p. 154.

<sup>24</sup> Andrei Soldatov, “Severnyi Kavkaz uzhe ne vkodit v chislo platzdarmov ‘mirovogo terrorizma’” [The North Caucasus has not already been among the international terrorism springboards], May 31, 2007, <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/analyticstext/analyticstext/id/1188719.html>.

<sup>25</sup> Murad Batal al-Shishiani, “Portrait of a Chechen Mujahid Leader,” April 22, 2004, [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no\\_cache=1&tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=26429](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=26429).

although he did not admit to being part of the organization.<sup>26</sup> As for the Caucasian radicals, they have used some ideological and operational weapons of al Qaeda. Since the 2000s, the Caucasian terrorists began using suicide bombings as a tool for their political-religious struggle. They have also tried to identify their activity in terms of the combat against “crusaders and Jews.”

However, the increasing popularity of radical Islam in today’s Caucasus is not explained by foreign intrigues, but rather because there are serious socioeconomic problems resulting in few opportunities in the area (career development, granting attractive jobs, corruption, and limits for social mobility). Russian political analyst (and former minister of separatist Chechnya) Shamil’ Beno correctly evaluated the situation when he said: “Fundamentalism cannot appear in a place where there are no serious problems in the society. Only an atmosphere of complete spiritual vacuum can force a young man to give up worldly temptations.”<sup>27</sup> In this sense, any penetration from the outside, including that of Arab or Central Asian co-religionists, can be effective only if the way has already been paved for it. Nonetheless, xenophobic and militant slogans continue to be the most important features of radical Islam in the North Caucasus. Thus Western politicians are faced with an important question: Is the confrontation with Russia on secondary issues (like Georgia or fears of a restoration of the Soviet Union) really justified, when the existing third forces consider Russia to the same extent their main enemy?

## Searching for an Exit from the North Caucasus Deadlock

Are there any constructive ways to overcome the current situation in the North Caucasus, where suicide bombings, acts of sabotage, and military strikes have become commonplace? Today there is no lack of alarmist prognoses and predictions, but at the same time a narrow corridor for maneuvering still exists. It is necessary to keep in mind that every world religion adapts itself to local conditions. If the famous Imam Shamil spread Tarikat Islam in Dagestan and Chechnya by force in the nineteenth century, this precise form of Islam is now actually considered “traditional Islam” in the eastern part of the Caucasus. And this form of Islam, which is supposed to be pro-Russian and loyal to the state, incorporates its own radicals as well. It is probable that the so-called Wahhabi form of Islam will undergo a complicated transformation and become more traditional and less radical. But it will require colossal work not only on the part of the authorities of the North Caucasian republics, but also on the part of Russia as a whole (authorities, experts, and society) to differentiate between terrorists and those who would be ready to pledge political loyalty to the state.

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<sup>26</sup> Abu Hafs, “Youth Is Going Out for Jihad,” November 12, 2006, <http://old.kavkazcenter.com/eng/content/2006/11/12/6388.shtml>.

<sup>27</sup> Dmitry Morozov, “Musul’anskiye organizatsii Rossii vyrazhayut obespokoennost’ po povodu uchastivshihsvya obvinenii v terrorizme” [Russia’s Muslim organizations express their concern on the frequent accusations in terrorism], March 21, 2005, <http://www.religare.ru/print15568.htm>.

It would also be very wrong to label the whole protest movement in the Northern Caucasus as Islamist. There is also a secular opposition in Ingushetia and Dagestan (opposing the Islamists), and its criticism is leveled against the republican authorities. While in Ingushetia the opposition unites people who have very different political backgrounds and views but share a common dislike of the present regional power, in Dagestan the opposition brings together activists from a number of Russian parties. Although in 2007–2008 their might and influence was considerably weakened, they remain active. Moreover, one should also bear in mind the so-called intra-apparatus opposition in all the entities of the region. This form of opposition does not use public slogans or hold open debates, but its role in administrative decisionmaking should not be underestimated.

Today, therefore, the agenda in the North Caucasus is not better or worse than it was in the early 1990s—it is merely different. Today, the main challenge to the security of the state is no longer posed by ethnic separatism, but by radical Islamism. One should keep in mind that this political movement is fuelled by shortcomings of both the central and regional Russian authorities, such as nepotism, lack of openness, incompetence, and unwillingness to hold a dialogue with opponents.

Correcting these deficiencies is, therefore, more than simply an issue of good governance for Moscow; it is a matter of national security. In this new context, Russia needs to develop a counterterrorist strategy commensurate with its overall objectives. Following the two Chechen military campaigns, some Russian officials and terrorism experts embraced Israeli methods of fighting terrorism. The technical side of Israel's operations is undoubtedly impressive, and Israel has successfully destroyed particular terrorist groups, but Russia needs an antiterror strategy that takes into consideration political and ideological elements. While recognizing the high professionalism of the Israelis, it must be said that Israel has not made integration of the local population in occupied territories its mission. Israel has concerned itself with guarantees of security for the Jewish state and basic survival in a hostile surrounding. There has been no talk of assimilation and acculturation in the occupied territories. It would be hard to imagine such a thing given the nature of the state of Israel, but Moscow's mission is to combine the North Caucasus republics and their citizens with the rest of Russia into a single political-civic nation. This is why an antiterrorist philosophy in Russia cannot be built using only Israel's experience in the Middle East. Rather, it should consider the Spanish, French, and British experience, in which the toughness of the government's position was combined with "soft power" (and "smart power"). In these cases, a division of their opponents into "moderates" and "radicals" was combined with surgical strikes against the ringleaders of terrorist groups. In fighting the terrorist threat today, Russia does not need pseudo-patriotic rhetoric. Instead, it needs a clear understanding of the dynamic in order to fully comprehend the underlying causes of terrorism used as a political strategy. Russia must be able to distinguish a terrorist act from a gangland slaying (very often the highest representatives of the Russian state identify terrorists as "bandits"). These measures must be accompanied by a relentless anticorruption strategy (because "privatization" of the local power provokes social protest and radicalism), creation of new personnel for the republican level of public service (well-educated beyond the Caucasian republics), and promotion of alternative versions of Islam (European Islam for example).

The final task for Russia is to engage in pragmatic cooperation with the West. Washington's official decision to include Doku Umarov, the leader of Islamic radicals in the North Caucasus, on its list of international terrorists is a goodwill gesture—part of the “reset.”<sup>28</sup> Although this sign should not be overanalyzed, the act has certainly been well received in Russia. The United States has not made a similar gesture in Russia's favor since perhaps September 2001. Washington's decision is all the more valuable to Russia in that President Dmitry Medvedev considers the North Caucasus to be his country's “main domestic political problem.” Of course the U.S. State Department's decision will not solve all the problems of violence in the North Caucasus region. Many of these problems are of a systemic domestic nature, and overcoming them will depend on the volition and quality of state administration of Russia itself. While the step Washington has now taken cannot be seen as a manifestation of geopolitical altruism, it is an acknowledgment of a shared interest with Washington's Russian partners. But that interest is determined by the views of the U.S. establishment. However, it is a good symbol, a symbol that overcoming the “zero-sum game” is potentially possible and that the “reset” is not just a successful decision by political technicians. Naturally, this symbolic step might be fulfilled by more concrete actions. It is necessary to organize regular exchanges of information at different levels (special services, intelligence, diplomatic contacts) concerning the activity of radical Islamists. It is necessary to stop rhetorical campaigns against each other regarding the most vulnerable spaces (North Caucasus for Russia, and the Middle East and Afghanistan for the United States)<sup>29</sup> and start engaging in more substantive dialogue.

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<sup>28</sup> “Designation of Caucasus Emirates Leader Doku Umarov,” U.S. Department of State, Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, June 23, 2010, <http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/other/des/143564.htm>.

<sup>29</sup> See detailed analysis of the Russian anti-American sentiments in the North Caucasus in Mikhail Alexseev, “A Vicious Circle: The Security Implications of Rising Anti-Americanism in the North Caucasus,” PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 113, George Washington University, [http://www.gwu.edu/~ieresgwu/assets/docs/PONARS\\_Eurasia\\_Policy\\_Conference\\_Book\\_Oct2010.pdf](http://www.gwu.edu/~ieresgwu/assets/docs/PONARS_Eurasia_Policy_Conference_Book_Oct2010.pdf).





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