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Transformation of the Chechen Insurgency

The Russian Federation is one of the countries most affected by terrorism. According to START'S Global Terrorism Database, between 1991 and 2008 it suffered from 1,107 terrorist incidents in which 3,100 people died and 5,100 were injured.¹ In the last 15 years, its capital, Moscow was targeted on at least 26 occasions.² The majority of these incidents were blamed on the North Caucasian insurgents who are commonly referred to as "Chechens," but who from at least 2007 onwards are far less ethno-nationalistic in their strategic orientation, scope and outreach, and Chechnya itself no longer is the most volatile part of the North Caucasus. This paper will attempt to explain the transformation of what used to be a primarily Chechen freedom struggle into a collection of mini-insurgencies engulfing almost all of the North Caucasian republics. It also will demonstrate how the originally decentralized Chechen war effort underwent a protracted process of Islamisation that paved the way for the establishment of the so-called Caucasus Emirate. This virtual entity uses the long-established legitimacy of the Chechen struggle to encompass the totality of the North Caucasian anti-Russian rebellions and present itself as the public face of a broader and not necessarily Islamist rebel phenomenon.

Historical Background

The Chechen insurgency is one of the byproducts of the Soviet Union's dissolution. Chechnya's long history of resistance to Moscow, the memory of the Soviet punitive deportation of the entire Chechen nation to Kazakhstan in the 1940s, and the subsequent policy of Russification of the republic prepared the ground for the post-Soviet violence that engulfed the North Caucasus. By the late 1980s, local leaders empowered by the new political reality of *perestroika* actively and openly debated the idea of a joint Caucasian "mountaineer" republic inhabited by a people with shared cultural roots and a history of

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¹ See: START-Global Terrorism Database, www.start.umd.edu/gtd.

² Caucasian Knot, "Over the past 15 years 1561 persons suffered in terror acts in Moscow," 18 February 2011, www.rf.eng.kavkaz-uzel.ru.

animosity towards Russia. This project never came to fruition. In 1991 though, Chechnya (but not Ingushetia, which constituted a joint 'autonomous' republic within the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic) declared independence. The Soviet Union, and subsequently the Russian Federation, argued strongly against Chechnya's right to pursue this path as it never enjoyed the status of a separate republic (e.g., Latvia or Ukraine) within the confines of the former state.

Moscow was worried that the tolerance of Chechnya's independence could instigate or fuel other regional or ethnic separatist efforts evidently present in post-Soviet Russia. It could not allow Chechnya to secede and establish a viable state radiating nationalism to its ethnically diverse neighbouring republics situated in the strategic region of North Caucasus. As early as December 1991 Russia attempted an armed intervention in Chechnya and later fought two vicious wars for control of this North Caucasian republic. The first of the Chechen Wars (1994-1996) ended with an agreement to settle the constitutional matters, i.e., Chechnya's political status, at a later date. Thus, the insurgents proved able of checking and reversing the Russian military gains and practically won independence for Chechnya. The second war (1999-2000) effectively terminated the existence of an independent Chechnya which currently is a federal subject of Russia.

Insurgency's Islamisation Before 1999

The downside of the Russian victory in the second war has been the continuation of the Chechen insurgency, which originally professed ethno-nationalist goals but that almost from its inception underwent a far-reaching transformation amounting to a creeping Islamist takeover of its symbols, discourse and practice. This might seem surprising given the initial Chechen reluctance to mobilise along religious lines and the fact that the Chechens are mostly adherents of mystical and spiritual Sufi Islam, which remains in opposition to Islamist ("political Islam") radicalism espoused by Salafi or Wahhabi Islam (both conservative and puritanical). Nonetheless, Islamist radicals contributed to a rapid process of Islam's reintroduction into the public realm during *perestroika* and in the early 1990s.³ Their task was facilitated by the Chechen Diaspora communities in Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Jordan, and also charities and non-governmental organisations originally established to aid the Azerbaijani war effort against the Christian Armenians for control of Nagorno-Karabakh (1988-1994). Moreover, Chechnya and its resistance against an invading "infidel" attracted the attention of some of the veterans of the Afghan jihad who established their presence in the republic around 1993. Their force of up to 80 fighters, led by Ibn al Khattab, a native of Saudi Arabia, successfully participated in the First Chechen War. Their exploits helped galvanise a wave of public support and sympathy for the Chechen cause in Saudi Arabia, which was intent on boosting its international Islamic credentials and stopped short of

³ C. Moore, P. Tumelty, "Foreign Fighters and the Case of Chechnya: A Critical Assessment," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol. 31, 2008, pp. 414–6.

preventing the flow of money and volunteers for a “classic” jihad against a non-Muslim invader (Russia).⁴

The concept of the “classic” jihad had very little to do with the original Chechen independence struggle or with Al Qaeda’s idea of a “global: jihad against the so-called “far enemy” (the West). Osama bin Laden, the leader of Al Qaeda, failed to win Khattab to his ideological platform as the latter established himself as an Islamist war hero, prolific fundraiser and a force to be reckoned with in Chechnya itself.⁵ The Saudi effectively turned into one of the republic’s warlords who meddled in local politics and saw no reason to decommission “their” units. Khattab’s political methodology of uncompromising localised “jihad” against Russia, introduction of Sharia law and his logistical and organisational prowess impressed many impoverished Chechens who longed for a semblance of law and order. Known commanders and officials, like Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev and Shamil Basayev, who lost the 1997 presidential election to Aslan Maskhadov, also adopted his Islamist platform and attempted to use it as a springboard to power in Chechnya.⁶ They also further legitimised Khattab’s presence and in reality paved the way for an Islamist takeover of the struggle for Chechen independence.

The clan based Chechens, who failed to establish any meaningful form of central governance between 1991 and 1999, proved unable to counter this takeover. What is more, politicised Islam was genuinely used in the process of forging a nationwide identity in Chechnya by a seemingly secular Maskhadov. This led to a further empowerment of the Islamic radicals whose “solidarity, fanaticism, economic self-reliance, and military strength” transformed them into a major powerbroker inside Chechnya.⁷ To undermine the Islamists’ social standing, Maskhadov began to adopt elements of their political platform as his own, and in early 1999 announced the establishment of an Islamic state in Chechnya. Simultaneously, however, the Islamists were plotting an external intervention into the affairs of the neighbouring Russian republic of Dagestan where a de facto independent Islamist mini-state was established in early 1998. It constituted an attractive powerbase for Khattab and his allies who wished to unite Chechnya and Dagestan into an imamate reminiscent of the one led by the legendary Imam Shamil, an icon of the North Caucasian irredentists, in the mid-19th century. Their plan came to nothing and no Islamist insurgency erupted in Dagestan in the late 1990s. Nonetheless, the 1999 Islamist invasion of this republic followed by the infamous apartment bombings in different Russian cities that were blamed on Chechnya’s Islamists were milestones in the history of the Chechen insurgency.

⁴ See: T. Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia: Violence and Pan-Islamism since 1979*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

⁵ B. G. Williams, “Allah’s foot soldiers,” in: M. Gammer (ed.), *Ethno-Nationalism, Islam and the State in the Caucasus: Post-Soviet Disorder*, London: Routledge, 2007, pp. 156-178.

⁶ See: B. G. Williams, “Shattering the Al-Qaeda-Chechen Myth (Part II),” *Chechnya Weekly*, Vol. 4, Issue 40, 6 November, 2003.

⁷ E. Souleimanov, “Chechnya, Wahhabism and the invasion of Dagestan,” *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 9, No. 4, December 2005, pp. 48-71.

Insurgency's Islamisation in the Aftermath of the Second Chechen War

The Islamists' violent internationalisation or regionalisation of the conflict was used by Russia as an excuse to "restore constitutional order" in the de-facto independent part of the North Caucasus.⁸ Surprisingly, it also augmented the Islamist takeover of the insurgency.

This process occurred against the backdrop of Russia's uncompromising attitude towards the insurgency on which Vladimir Putin's popularity had originally been built. However, while Russia successfully deposed Maskhadov and destroyed any semblance of Chechen independence in the Second Chechen War, it also imposed a certain degree of unification on the previously warring rebels who were forced to improve relations (also with the Islamists), and reframed the whole conflict as an anti-terrorist operation (2000-2009). Furthermore, Akhmad Kadyrov, Chechnya's Sufi mufti (most senior religious authority), led the pro-Russian Chechen faction during the Second War and then led the Moscow-loyal local administration. All of these developments strengthened the Islamists' standing within the insurgency as it regrouped in the mountainous Southern part of Chechnya.

In a self-fulfilling prophecy, Russia deployed the discourse of the "arc of Islamic terrorism" while describing the Chechen insurgency and its alleged linkages with the "terrorist" Taliban in Afghanistan. Russia's "jihadisation" of the Chechen struggle was further facilitated by the events of 9/11 and the subsequent discovery of the Chechen episodes in the biographies of the two of the 19 plane hijackers.⁹ In the post-9/11 world this equalled subordination of at best a "classic," defensive Chechen jihad to the globally oriented and anti-Western Al Qaeda, which never maintained any sort of direct control over foreign volunteers present in the North Caucasus, not to mention forces loyal to Maskhadov.

From the rebels' point of view, the upside of this turn of events was the re-establishment of Chechnya in the consciousness of the global *ummah* (Muslim community) of which parts perceived the post-9/11 reality as an outright victimisation of Islam. Whereas ethno-nationalist Chechens interpreted this as a chance for foreign assistance to an isolated and cornered insurgency, the Islamists began to gravitate towards the idea of a global jihad with Chechnya as one of its leading fronts. As it later transpired, the internationalist agenda of this concept gave the Islamists one more chance to transcend Chechnya's borders and broaden the North Caucasian battlefield.

Insurgency's Regionalisation and Internationalisation

The seven federal subjects of the Russian North Caucasian Federal District form probably the most volatile part of Russia. Throughout the last 20 years the region suffered from chronic

⁸ For more details, see: P. Murphy, *The Wolves of Islam: Russia and the Faces of Chechen Terror*, Washington: Potomac Books Ltd., 2004.

⁹ See: B. G. Williams, "From 'Secessionist Rebels' to 'Al-Qaeda Shock Brigades': Assessing Russia's Efforts to Extend the Post-September 11th War on Terror to Chechnya," *Comparative Studies on South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East*. Vol. 23, No. 2, 2003.

instability and political uncertainty because of a multitude of conflict on or within its borders. These led to the collapse of local trade and industries and undermined any prospects for investment and jobs. The Chechen insurgents definitely share responsibility for this state of affairs with Russia, but the latter, in the aftermath of the 2004 Beslan school siege, effectively removed any remnants of self-governance throughout the country. From then on, the heads of governments of Russia's federal subjects (including all the North Caucasian republics) were to be chosen by the president and later approved by the local legislatures. Thus Moscow might have increased control over its far flung provinces but also made itself immediately responsible for all of the federal subjects' woes, which had never been meaningfully addressed by the incompetent, cronyist and corrupt local authorities. Moreover, the centre proved disinterested in seriously addressing the socio-economic deficiencies in a traditionally volatile region which was perceived almost solely through security-related lenses.

The aforementioned factors, coupled with sectarian tension between the Muslim majority and the Orthodox Russian minority, and Russia's preoccupation with Chechnya, a hotbed of local strife, prepared the ground for an Islamist proliferation in the North Caucasus. After Maskhadov's death in 2005, the Islamists captured the Chechen presidency and were able to complete the Chechen insurgency's transformation. In the same year they announced the establishment of a "Caucasus Front" as a first step on the road to the creation of a regional and broad anti-Russian rebellion. Consequently, they purged ethno-nationalist and Chechen focused ministers (like Akhmed Zakayev) from the Chechen government's ranks, and in 2007 announced the establishment of the Caucasus Emirate, a virtual expansionist successor of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria. This broadening of the battlefield was to provide a joint regional but also pan-Islamic platform to a multitude of socio-political armed struggles and mini-insurgencies that erupted in North Caucasus in the aftermath of the Second Chechen War. These were usually disregarded by Russia, which was focused on stabilising Chechnya.

The Emirate wishes to act as an ideological, logistical and organisational hub of the North Caucasian strife but its control over disparate rebel factions is often illusory. However, it attracts a disproportionate level of attention because of its pan-Islamist rhetoric, alleged overlap with Al Qaeda and spectacular terrorist attacks conducted in Russia proper. At its best, it is able to mobilise a few hundred fighters divided into *jama'ats* (effectively: platoons).¹⁰ Its feeble military presence should not, however, mask its adherence to the project of global jihad. Its public statements are full of references to jihadist struggles around the globe and its warring local commanders are heavily criticized in fatwas issued by prominent jihadist ideologues like Abu Baseer at-Tartousi and Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi who accuse factionalists of fomenting *fitna* (civil war, disagreement, strife), one of the most serious accusations that could be directed at any pious Muslim, and especially at individuals

¹⁰ C. Swift, "Fragmentation in the North Caucasus Insurgency," *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 3, Issue 11-12, November 2010, www.ctc.usma.edu/sentinel.

perceiving themselves as holy warriors.¹¹ Moreover, the Emirate approves of European-based jihadists plots to attack Russian soft targets, conduct fundraising or recruitment efforts for the purposes of Chechen “jihad”—the last such network was destroyed in November/December 2010.¹²

Conclusions

The transformation processes that culminated in the establishment of the Caucasus Emirate in 2007 allowed the Chechen insurgency to withstand the Russian onslaught and survive beyond the termination of the anti-terrorist operation in the republic. The insurgency adapted to the changing socio-political reality of the North Caucasus. It transformed itself from an agent of instability partly responsible for the region’s dire straits into an entity aiming to unite struggles in different republics against the stagnant, ineffective and corrupt political reality of the North Caucasus. In the North Caucasian conditions, this imperfect unification could only have been achieved as a result of applying an Islamist outlook to the struggle against Orthodox Russia and its local allies. This manoeuvre prolonged the insurgency lifespan but failed to seriously challenge the Russian presence and dominance of the region. Moreover, by aligning themselves with the internationally ostracised current of global jihadism, the rebels nullified chances of any serious external interest or involvement in the conflict. Thus, Russia will continue to address the problem of Islamised insurgency in its borders as a national matter and will not seek international approval of how it handles its own “war on terror” from countries and organisations involved in the “global” equivalent of this conflict.

The rare, spectacular attacks in Moscow, such as the 24 January Domodedovo bombing, also will fail to improve the rebels’ chances of success. The Russian counterterrorist strategy effectively utilises a counter-guerrilla paradigm with protection of the state’s authority and administrative control as its main priority.¹³ This means that Russia is likely and willing to absorb the effects of individual terrorist attacks on its soil that target the country’s population but will do its utmost to preserve its administrative cohesion. The latter will come under intense scrutiny in the North Caucasus as the region borders the Krasnodar Krai, the site of the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi. The rebels are fully aware of this, and in the recent months seem to have shifted their focus and begun to attack targets of economic and industrial importance in the vicinity of the future Olympic arenas. In response, Russia will most probably prolong its policies of targeted killings and disappearances of well-known and alleged rebels (like the liquidation of Supyan Abdullaev, Emirate’s de facto deputy commander, on 28 March in Ingushetia) to decimate their ranks but will fail to undermine the insurgency’s root causes. In the long term, these extrajudicial

¹¹ “Appeal of Sheikh at-Tartousi to Muhannad: Either repent and obey Emir Abu Usman or leave Caucasus and go home,” 4 October 2010, www.kavkazcenter.com.

¹² BBC News, “Police arrest 10 over Belgian ‘Islamist terror plot,’” 17 February 2011, www.bbc.co.uk.

¹³ A. Soldatov, I. Brogina, “Domodedovo: not a terrorist attack but a natural disaster?” 15 February 2011, www.agentura.ru.

measures will fail to stabilise the situation in the region, which will continue to be heavily militarised and policed by different federal and local agencies and bodies. Thus the insurgency may constitute nothing more than a security irritant to the strategic interests of Russia, one that is unlikely to disappear and will, from time to time, remind both the authorities in Moscow and the world of its endurance and resilience via spectacular terrorist attacks on Russia proper.