

# Middle East Policy Council

## Journal Essay

### The Caucasus Emirate: Genealogy of an Islamist Insurgency

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Recent years have seen a series of massive terrorist attacks in Russia, serving as a reminder that on the southwestern periphery of that vast Eurasian country, a de facto civil war is still going on. The attacks on downtown Moscow subway stations in March 2010, a market in Vladikavkaz, North Ossetia in September 2010 and Moscow's Domodedovo Airport in January 2011 cost nearly 100 lives, mostly civilians. Less lethal, but more frequent, diversionary and terrorist assaults take place almost daily in the North Caucasus, a multiethnic region of the Russian Federation spreading across the northern slopes of the Greater Caucasus Mountain Range from the Caspian Sea to the Black Sea. According to official data provided by the National Anti-Terrorism Committee of the Russian Federation, the number of terrorist attacks in the nation increased by nearly 60 percent during 2009, the very year that the Kremlin officially declared the end of its highly praised counterterrorist operation in the Chechen Republic.<sup>2</sup> In 2010, moreover, that increase more than doubled.<sup>3</sup> It is no surprise, then, that according to the recently adopted *Russian National Security Strategy Up to 2020*, terrorism was identified as the key threat to the internal integrity of the society and nation. Also reflected in this document is the constant increase in the scope of terrorist attacks in recent years.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, members of a single organization — the Caucasus Emirate or groups associating themselves with that entity — have been responsible for nearly all of the terrorist attacks.

This article will attempt to reveal the specific features of the social environment that generate the diversionary and terrorist activity of the North Caucasian insurgency, in general, and of the Caucasus Emirate, in particular. It identifies Islam in its militant (*jihadī*) interpretation and ethnonationalist separatism as the ideological wellsprings of the resistance movement. The holdover of archaic forms of social organization that emphasize the custom of blood feud as an effective means of social mobilization ensures a constant influx of new recruits to the expanding resistance movement, a process that has persisted in spite of the enormous material advantages of the Russian state. This article is, furthermore, concerned with mapping out the historical background of the origins of this organization, as well as its structure, ideology and methods.

## THE NORTH CAUCASUS

The North Caucasus itself represents a mosaic of nationalities; it is one of the most ethnolinguistically diverse regions in the world. Concentrated within a small geographical area are dozens of ethnicities, the largest of which, the Chechens, has a population of around one million, while the smallest, such as the Aguls in Dagestan, have populations of only a few thousand. In the northeastern Caucasus (Dagestan, Chechnya, Ingushetia), the predominant languages are of the Nakho-Dagestani family. With the exception of the Chechen and the related Ingush languages, they are mutually almost incomprehensible. The Northwestern Caucasus consists of the so-called dual republics of Kabardino-Balkaria and Karachay-Cherkessia, as well as Adyghea; the Turkic (mutually intelligible Karachay and Balkar) and the Adyghe (spoken by the Adyghe, Kabardey, Cherkess and Abaza) language groups are spoken here. Members of the Turkic language group also populate Dagestan (Kumyks and Nogais). The central part of the Caucasus is demographically dominated by the Ossetians, whose language belongs to the Iranian branch of the Indo-European family. The Russian population is demographically strong in the ethnically autonomous regions of the Northwest Caucasus and in North Ossetia, while the presence of Russians in Ingushetia, Chechnya and Dagestan is now negligible. With the specific exception of North Ossetians, Islam is the predominant religion among all nationalities in the North Caucasus.<sup>5</sup>

Historically, the North Caucasus was divided into a number of small principalities, khanates and so-

called military democracies, which were engaged in constant rivalry over the limited natural resources, pasture and farmland in the rugged Greater Caucasus Range and the foothills and lowlands to the north. Centralized states in the traditional sense only existed there briefly, mainly during periods of foreign domination. While Persia tried repeatedly — and unsuccessfully — to push its way into the area of present-day Dagestan, in modern times it was the Ottoman Empire accompanied by its vassal state, the Crimean Khanate, that occasionally dominated the northwestern foothills, contributing to the spread of Sunni Islam among the mostly pagan tribes. From the second half of the eighteenth century, however, Turkish influence in the region of the Black Sea and North Caucasus gradually declined. This was sealed at the end of that century, when the expanding Russian Empire began to show increased interest in the vast areas of the North Caucasus.

The region was intensively colonized by Russia until 1864, when the organized armed resistance from some of the North Caucasian mountain dwellers was broken.<sup>6</sup> In the eastern part of the North Caucasus, the resistance was led mainly by Sufi *tariqas* (orders or brotherhoods), which have been firmly established since that time and are regarded to this day as a traditionalist form of Islam in the area.<sup>7</sup> That was the heyday of the now legendary Dagestani Avar Shamil, leader of the united Imamate of Dagestan and Chechnya. For a quarter century, his guerilla armies were able to wage effective resistance to the Romanov Empire in spite of overwhelming odds, until Shamil was captured in 1859. As a consequence of a series of unrelenting conflicts, uprisings, repressions, ethnic cleansing and displacements, known in regional historiography as the Great Caucasian War, a noticeable change occurred in the demographic maps of the region, and, as mentioned above, the resistance of the North Caucasians was finally broken.<sup>8</sup> However, even in the second half of the nineteenth century — especially in the northeastern part of the Caucasus, which had maintained its genuine demographic character to the greatest extent — a number of separatist revolts occurred in which Islam played a role. As in recent decades, it was a common ideology of resistance that united the region's linguistically, culturally and socially fragmented ethnicities, clans and social strata. In the end, all of those uprisings were put down bloodily, first by St. Petersburg and then by Moscow.<sup>9</sup>

With the notable exceptions of the brutal purges of local elites during the Stalin era and the wartime anti-Nazi deportations of Karachays, Balkars, Chechens and Ingush to Central Asia — to be returned to their homelands about a decade later in the middle of the 1950s — the approximately 70 years of existence within the Soviet state was a period of socioeconomic stability and relative prosperity. Nonetheless, the range and scope of restrictions in the region, where separatist yearnings had never disappeared entirely, were especially severe, even by Soviet standards.<sup>10</sup> Islam also retained considerable influence in spite of decades of often aggressive atheist policies aimed at uprooting it. This was especially the case in the more traditionalist northeastern Caucasus; in fact, religion merely shifted to the sphere of private life with local largely clandestine Sufi orders becoming a particular target of security forces. Still, according to an official Soviet source, more than half the total number of believers in the North Caucasus belonged to a Sufi brotherhood, whereas in the case of the Chechen-Ingush and Dagestan republics alone, there were more than half a million adepts of a formerly outlawed religious community.<sup>11</sup>

Shortly after the breakup of the Soviet Union, Moscow was confronted by Chechen separatism, leading to a bloody war in 1994-96 and an invasion by the Russian Army. After a break in the fighting, during which Chechnya regained its de facto independence, warfare erupted again in 1999 following a failed incursion of united Chechen-Dagestani jihadi forces into the areas of western Dagestan controlled by local Salafis.<sup>12</sup> By 2000, the majority of the territory of the rebellious republic of Chechnya was under the control of the federal army and of units of the Russian Ministry of Interior along with local pro-Moscow Chechen police forces.<sup>13</sup> Yet tension in the region, where patterns of archaic social organization have largely persisted, continued unabated. Furthermore, as the last decade has shown, the tension has transformed itself into a concentrated Islamist insurgency that has expanded from within Chechnya's borders to the neighboring republics of the North Caucasus.

## Socioeconomic Problems

Ubiquitous corruption, high even by the standards of the Russian Federation, as well as nepotism, clientelism, unemployment and other societal ills have traditionally been the main causes of social dissatisfaction in the North Caucasus.<sup>14</sup> According to independent sources, unemployment in this region, traditionally one of the poorest on a nationwide scale, varies from 12 percent in North Ossetia to 30-40 percent in Ingushetia and Dagestan, and the incidence is nearly twice as high among young

people,<sup>15</sup> although federal sources generally state an average of 16 percent for the region as a whole.<sup>16</sup> Dissatisfaction with the current situation is particularly acute among young people, especially those from the isolated, non-industrialized mountainous areas of the northeastern Caucasus; their unemployment level is especially high, while their level of education is relatively low. Meanwhile, almost all of the republics of the North Caucasus are receiving steady subsidies from the federal budget; in Ingushetia, Chechnya and Dagestan, for example, those subsidies represent 80-90 percent of the republics' budgets.<sup>17</sup> Moscow's ambitious plans for the economic development of the region have traditionally been ineffective.<sup>18</sup> Because of the rampant local corruption as well as a certain laxness and propensity to corruption on the part of the federal authorities who distribute the funds, a significant portion of the aid very often ends up in the pockets of high officials and those closest to them, who are from what are in effect closed power clans, often structured on the basis of blood kinship.<sup>19</sup> This fact reinforces the opinion, widespread among the local populace, that the Kremlin is merely trying to secure the loyalty of the unpopular local elites, whose only goal is the liquidation of political opposition and the accumulation of money and property.<sup>20</sup>

## Regional Solidarity and Nationalism

The nationalities of the North Caucasus are prone to ethno-nationalism. For instance, although they have been living side by side for centuries, marriages between members of different Dagestani ethnicities are still relatively rare, as are marriages between Dagestanis and their Chechen neighbors; intermarriage is rare even among the ethnically and linguistically very closely related Chechens and Ingush. The situation is similar, if somewhat more relaxed, in the northwest among the members of the Adyghe and Turkic nationalities, who see each other as competitors. Interethnic tension persists partly because of the constant rivalry for access to high positions in the state administration, as is the case in Dagestan and the republics of the northwestern Caucasus. Also playing a role is the heritage of Stalin's deportations, when members of two or more ethnic groups lay claim to politico-economic control over contested territory. So far, however, this interethnic tension has been successfully held to a low level.

On the other hand, also playing a very important role in the local context is a sense of regional solidarity among the mountain folk of the North Caucasus. Awareness of a shared culture has created a consciousness (by no means confined solely to the members of the resistance and their sympathizers) of a united identity transcending ethnicity, a sort of regional internationalism, serving alongside Islam as the ideological cover for the proclaimed North Caucasian theocracy. An integral component of the regional solidarity of the North Caucasus mountain dwellers is their opposition to the Russians as the "Other." This opposition is based on ethno-nationalism and to some extent religious rivalry, as it draws on the memory of wars waged against the Russian colonization of the North Caucasus in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Oral history is still strong, in spite of decades spent within the borders of the Soviet Union when this consciousness was stifled; and the collective memory of the nationalities of the North Caucasus has preserved images of the wars of national liberation of that period and the later rebellions and their suppression. To this day, these images constitute an integral part of their ethnic identities, especially among the Adyghe and Dagestani ethnicities and the Chechens.<sup>21</sup> Another important fact in this context is that many natives of the North Caucasus travel to the Russian interior for their university education and jobs, where they routinely encounter entrenched anti-Caucasus attitudes, and where they are increasingly regarded as second-class citizens. It is also not uncommon for them to come into conflict with the law-enforcement agencies, and there are fairly frequent conflicts with the local population, usually Russians.<sup>22</sup>

The local separatist circles are fully aware that, because of their small populations, the ethnicities of the North Caucasus are obviously unable to achieve independence from Moscow unless they establish close ties of solidarity and cooperation across the whole of the region. Efforts to create strictly territorially defined nation-states in the North Caucasus would necessarily lead to a stirring up of local territorial conflicts, in view of the tangled nature of the ethnically populated areas, the existence of disputed territory and the latent interethnic tensions.<sup>23</sup> This further strengthens the position of Islamic identity, common to the large majority of nationalities of the region, and the idea of creating a non-ethnic Islamic theocracy, the diversity of which, from the viewpoint of the local separatists, can disrupt the sense of regional community and prospects for independence.<sup>24</sup> The jihad itself declared by the Caucasus Emirate is a direct reference to the tradition of Shamil's multiethnic Imamate. It underscores the idea of regional solidarity, shared religion and culture and the collective memory of

the bloody anti-colonial wars and rebellions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>25</sup> These appeals resonate with the nationalistically oriented segment of the population of the North Caucasus, with whom (political) Islam enjoys increasing strength.<sup>26</sup>

## Politicization of Islam and Salafism

As has been stated above, from the time of the anti-colonial wars in the North Caucasus, Islam has served as an element of collective identity that has united the region's many ethnically and linguistically splintered groups in opposition to Russian colonial expansion. Also for this reason, as will be discussed below, Islam was chosen several years ago by representatives of the Chechen resistance as an ideological cover for the newly conceived resistance that would now encompass not only Chechnya, but almost all of the North Caucasus. In this region, however, Islam has not been historically united. In the northeast, Sufi tariqas (especially Naqshbandiyya and Qadiriyya) have dominated from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, while this conception of Islam is alien to the northwestern Caucasus. There is also disunity in the area of *madhabs*, or schools of law, within Islam. While Muslims of the northeastern Caucasus mostly adhere to the Shafiite school, those of North Ossetia as well as the Turkic and Adyghe ethnicities of the northwest mostly adhere to Hanafite school. In all cases, however, the traditional North Caucasian faith can be specified as an amalgam of the relics of local pagan cults and customary law with Islam — or with Orthodox Christianity in the case of majority North Ossetians.<sup>27</sup>

The internal dynamic of the insurgency as well as the effort to create a uniform and clear ideology for the armed resistance that would unite diverse Muslims of the whole region has in the end contributed to the fact that Salafi Islam or a militant form of it, sometimes called jihadism, with its emphasis on the idea of holy war in defense of the homeland, has assumed a leading role in recent years. This fact, particularly in the northeastern Caucasus, has enabled the overcoming of established and historically very strong family/clan and tariqa loyalties. It is likewise important that the departure from traditional Sufi Islam that is apparent in recent years is taking place in large part as a social protest against the corrupt local Islamic authorities, whose close ties to highly unpopular regimes have long been depriving them of the favor of ordinary believers.<sup>28</sup>

Given these circumstances, the politicization of Islam goes hand in hand with ethno-nationalistically inspired appeals to armed resistance in the name of independence. In this respect, Islam, especially in its Salafi reading, appears to many as an alternative ideology, offering a relatively simple plan for solving society's problems and a recipe for creating a functional social order that would replace the Moscow-dominated state institutions that are believed to have failed. As in other areas of the Muslim world, the importance of Salafism is growing, not in a theological, but rather in a socioeconomic and political, sense. Given this situation, more and more people of the North Caucasus are viewing the jihadists as the only — although far from ideal — political counterweight to the local regimes, and as a real power that is able and willing to change the situation.<sup>29</sup> Also playing a role is the growing opposition of the traditionally oriented, mostly rural people of the North Caucasus towards the liberalization of social life in urban areas, which they regard as a dangerous deterioration of traditional morals and values — or as Russification. This development needs to be seen in the context of the general post-Soviet return to ethnic roots, which has been especially strong in the extremely conservative Northeast Caucasus.

## Archaic Social Institutions and Blood Feuds

After the attacks by the Jihadi coalition on western Dagestan in August 1999, the bombing attacks on apartment buildings in Russian cities a month later, and the terrorist attacks on American cities in September 2001, a "witch hunt" was announced in the republics of the North Caucasus for real or alleged "Wahhabis." Units of the local militia and of anti-terrorist authorities have so far jailed thousands of people suspected, with varying degrees of justification, of belonging to the Salafis or sympathizing or cooperating with them, or of being their relatives. People whose deep religiosity caused suspicion have often been arrested. It was far from certain that they were Salafis, but members of the armed forces, especially those under the Interior Ministry, were not particularly knowledgeable about theological nuances. Before long, this struggle against "Wahhabism" became a profitable business for some republican police officers as they started arresting relatives of local nouveau riches, and then poorer people, releasing them in exchange for ransom. Granted immunity, often poorly paid, poorly educated and lacking professionalism, the members of the local armed security forces found in the rhetoric of the fight against terrorism the opportunity to make a decent income on the side or to

secure rapid career advancement. Nonetheless, while in jail, many of the prisoners, whether real or supposed Salafis and terrorists, were routinely beaten, tortured and humiliated in accordance with (post-) Soviet tradition in order to extract confessions. This contributed to the fact that after their release, they set the goal of avenging themselves on the militiamen or their relatives.<sup>30</sup> If any of the alleged or real Salafis or members of the resistance movement fell victim to police investigation, members of the victim's clan, generally his paternal relatives, would seek vengeance.<sup>31</sup>

In the more tradition-bound areas of the northeast, the persisting custom of the blood feud, based on an archaic conception of male honor, requires revenge for even the slightest verbal humiliation or physical attack. This, combined with clannish social organization, ensures an avalanche-like escalation.<sup>32</sup> As mentioned, sometimes revenge is sought not by the victim, but by relatives of individuals who have lost their lives, health or honor while in jail. The motives for activity against the state thus are not necessarily political, at least not during the initial phase. Fighting against the state, after all, is not an easy task; in order to take revenge, material or logistical support is usually needed. Individuals thus become associated with the resistance movement, where they are influenced by the prevalent jihadist ideology. Those who have not taken vengeance also have very strong sympathies with the resistance movement and often provide it with active assistance.<sup>33</sup> Support among the local populace is crucial for the overall success of the insurgency as it provides the militants with necessary shelter and relief, facilitating recruitment of new members.

## ORIGINS AND ORGANIZATION OF THE CAUCASUS EMIRATE

The event that took place on October 31, 2007, must be viewed in light of the circumstances described above. That was the day that the leader of the Chechen separatists, Doku Umarov, announced the creation of the Caucasus Emirate — an Islamic theocracy based on Sharia rule, which was to spread across the territory of the autonomous North Caucasus territories of the Russian Federation. At the same time, Umarov resigned as president of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, an office which he had formally held from June 2006, in order to declare himself the "*emir* [commander] of the mujahideen [fighters of jihad] of the Caucasus Emirate" and "leader of the jihad and ghazavat" within the territory of the North Caucasus.<sup>34</sup> According to Umarov, the republics of the North Caucasus were nothing but "ethnic, territorial colonial zones, created by non-believers for the purpose of dividing up Muslims,"<sup>35</sup> and by a special decree of the emir, they were abolished. Created in their place were the following *vilayets*, or provinces, listed from east to west: Dagestan, Nogay Steppe (the southeast part of Stavropol Krai), Noxçiyçö (Chechnya), Ğalgayçö (Ingushetia), Iriston (North Ossetia) and Kabardino-Balkaria-Karachay.<sup>36</sup> To be formed within each vilayet were large territorial armed groups, or *jamaats*, or whose leaders, or *valis*, were to be appointed by the emir and approved by the Supreme Council, or *Majlis-ul-Shura*.<sup>37</sup> Judicial power within the emirate was to be exercised formally by the Supreme Shariat Court under the leadership of a *qadi*, an Islamic judge, appointed by the emir and approved by the Majlis-ul-Shura.<sup>38</sup>

## REGIONALIZATION OF THE RESISTANCE

The territorial expansion of the separatist movement to the autonomous areas of the North Caucasus was already an established trend by 2007, given its seal by the rebel movement between 2004 and 2006. It is worth recalling the declaration of Umarov's predecessors on the necessity of uniting the resistance of the North Caucasus and their associated activism. While just a year earlier — for the last time in the summer of 2003 — Aslan Maskhadov, the president of the Chechen separatists at the time, had called on his fellow combatants to refrain from making attacks beyond the borders of the Chechen Republic, his plans changed significantly by mid-2004. He characterized them clearly in his last media interview, which occurred on March 4, 2005:

... we have been forced to expand the front of the resistance. In compliance with my orders, new sectors have been established: in Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, Dagestan, etc. The emirs of those fronts have been appointed, and all of them are subject to the military command of the Chechen resistance.<sup>39</sup>

The expansion of the Chechen jihad to all of the North Caucasus likewise became the main goal of Maskhadov's successor, Abdul-Halim Sadulayev. By the summer of 2005, he had issued a special decree announcing the creation of a united Caucasian Front consisting of sectors in Ingushetia, North Ossetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, the Stavropol and Krasnodar provinces, Karachay-Cherkessia and

Adyghea, subject to the Ichkerian (Chechen) Supreme Command. At that time, the front in Dagestan was regarded as independent.<sup>40</sup> Sadulayev then issued a special order appointing the commanders of the individual fronts; since then, this has become established practice. It did not take long for the practical results of the reorganization of the resistance movement — and its institutionalized expansion along the northern part of the Greater Caucasus Range — to appear. Soon there began concentrated attacks by Islamist forces: on Nazran, the de facto capital of Ingushetia, in 2004, and on Nalchik, the capital of Kabardino-Balkaria, in 2005, claiming over a hundred lives. The targets of the attacks at the time were mainly police stations and members of the armed forces generally.<sup>41</sup> There was an overall intensification of the participation of fighters from outside of Chechnya in the resistance movement.

In fact, the concentrated effort of the Chechen commanders to spread the terrorist and diversionary activity into the territory of the autonomous republics of the North Caucasus was reflected in a noticeable weakening of the Chechen resistance after the bloody war of 1999-2000 (the Second Russo-Chechen War) and after the subsequent counterinsurgency policy of Russian security forces, along with their pro-Moscow Chechen allies.<sup>42</sup> At the time, the Salafis were becoming a predominant force in the Chechnya-based insurgency movement. Given this situation, the Chechen resistance had no choice but to take advantage of the material and human potential of neighboring areas, where there was growing discontent with the socioeconomic situation among some youth and with the seemingly anti-Islamic policies of the local elite, and where jihadist ideology had infiltrated with varying degrees of intensity since the 1990s.

## IDEOLOGICAL SHIFT

Among the leadership of the Caucasus Emirate and its individual components, the use of Quranic vocabulary has become commonplace. Among other things, this is illustrated by the formal organization of the emirate, in which only Arabic-Muslim titles are used. Yet, this merely confirms a trend that became established around the beginning of the millennium.<sup>43</sup> Territory under the control of infidels (*kuffarun*) or apostates (*munafiqun*) is called *dar al-harb* (land of war), from which it is necessary through armed jihad to create *dar al-islam* or *dar as-salaam* (land of Islam or of peace). The rebels call themselves warriors for the faith (*mujahideen*). According to a characteristic statement of Umarov, made in the months after the declaration of the Caucasus Emirate as he began to try to support the idea of the resistance in the North Caucasus as an integral part of global jihad,

The Caucasus is occupied by infidels and apostates and is dar al-harb, a land of war, and our immediate task is to turn it into dar as-salam [land of peace], to institute Sharia on its territory and to drive out the infidels. ... After driving out the infidels, we shall have to get back all of the historical territory of Muslims, and that territory is [also] located beyond the borders of the Caucasus.<sup>44</sup>

The declaration of the Caucasus Emirate also brought an increased consciousness of solidarity with Muslims around the world and the efforts of the faithful to cast off the yoke of infidels and apostates and to establish Islamic regimes — the very rhetoric from which Umarov and his predecessors, not long before, had been trying to distance themselves. In a recent statement, the leader of the Caucasus mujahideen pointed out that the Chechens had been fighting for their independence for more than 300 years, and that it was, therefore, not permissible to compare them to al-Qaeda or to various other Islamist extremists. In one of his first declarations after being chosen emir, Umarov drew a parallel between the resistance in Chechnya and the North Caucasus and the desires of the rest of the Islamic world, i.e., the Muslim *ummah*, where non-Islamic regimes are in power:

Today our brothers are at war in Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia and Palestine. Any one who attacks Muslims, wherever they may be, is also our enemy. Our enemy is not only Russia, but also America, England, Israel and anyone who is waging war against Islam and Muslims.<sup>45</sup>

Umarov, acting as emir of the Muslims of the North Caucasus, and those close to him have been much more cautious with their declarations since then, trying to emphasize that the Chechens do not really have problems with America and the West. However, Islamist rhetoric, familiar since the arrival of Movladi Udugov, officially one of the leading ideologues of the Caucasus Emirate, has become firmly entrenched in the vocabulary and symbolism of the local Islamists. Ironically, although he regards himself as an emir, Umarov, like most of his predecessors, has a very poor understanding of Islamic

theology. In the opinion of some commentators, he makes serious errors when quoting verses from the Quran, and he is not conversant in Arabic.<sup>46</sup>

## **SCHISM: NATIONALISTS VS ISLAMISTS**

The declaration of the North Caucasus Emirate meant a de facto recognition that the Ichkerian project, laboriously constructed since the early 1990s, had collapsed. With the fiasco of the first attempt in Chechen history to build a nation-state (1996-99), the deepening postwar schism within Chechen society, and the consolidation of the Kadyrov "clan", the idea of creating an independent Chechen state ceased to be as appealing to many Chechens as it had been during the previous decade. The gradual radicalization within the resistance movement, the core of which already consisted of jihadists by the turn of the millennium, brought a strengthening of the role of Islam and its Salafi offshoot. This derailed nationalism as the ideological basis for Chechen separatism. Appealing to Islam or to the idea of a (primarily) regional jihad based on solidarity among mountain folk of the North Caucasus — and not to the idea of Chechen (Avar, Ingush, Balkar or Kabardin) nationalism — had much greater potential for inspiring the disaffected youth of the North Caucasus to take up arms and fight for the liberation of their homelands from the "rule of the infidel," "Russian occupying forces" or their local "puppets and henchmen," "traitors" and "apostates," with the ultimate goal of creating an Islamic state of justice and prosperity.<sup>47</sup>

The report on the founding of the Caucasus Emirate further inflamed the conflict that was already going on, personified by Movladi Udugov, a leading ideologue of Chechen jihadism, and the secular-minded foreign minister of Ichkeria, Akhmad Zakayev, and their circles. In the aftermath of Umarov's declaration of the Caucasus Emirate, Zakayev disputed the legitimacy of ending Chechen independent statehood. He called it just another in a series of attempts by the Russian Federation secret services to discredit the Chechen resistance movement that had been trying to establish an independent state. Zakayev, who has long been in exile in London, "vehemently condemned" Umarov's declaration, which he said "was meant to transfer the legal struggle of the Chechen people for their freedom and independence into the category of so-called international terrorism, which has absolutely nothing in common with the interests of the Chechen people or with Islamic values."<sup>48</sup> During the years that followed, tensions mounted in the Chechen separatists' camp between nationalists and Islamists, leading to a significant split in August 2010, which persisted until July 2011.<sup>49</sup> It is necessary, however, to point out that the sympathy of international society to the Chechen insurgency gradually shrank to a minimum following the shocking attacks on the Dubrovka Theatre in Moscow in 2002 and on the secondary school in Beslan, North Ossetia, in 2004, which claimed hundreds of lives.

## **ORGANIZATION AND METHODS**

Within the framework of the individual vilayets, there are active, territorially defined jamaats that are generally self-sufficient with respect to both finances<sup>50</sup> and human resources and enjoy a high degree of autonomy. The main tie that binds them to the Caucasian Emirate seems to be their common ideology. Although cooperation between individual jamaats should not be underestimated, especially those that are geographically adjacent — and when massive attacks are involved that require coordination — they represent a territorially fragmented network with a flexible hierarchy and only a few dozen to a few hundred fighters.<sup>51</sup>

The Islamists have been combining terrorist attacks, generally carried out in the Russian interior in places where large numbers of people are amassed, with primarily diversionary (guerrilla) activities within the territory of the North Caucasus; assassinations of officials and especially local police officers have been carried out as well. While attacks in the region are usually implemented so as to avoid the loss of civilian lives, indiscriminate terrorist attacks are carried out regularly within the Russian interior, especially in Moscow, with the goal of as many civilian deaths as possible. From the viewpoint of the Islamists, this choice of targets has its justifications. In the North Caucasus, the Islamists can rely on a network of local people, whether from among their own relatives or from individuals who sympathize with the resistance movement. In the case of attacks in their domestic environment, they can withdraw to the safety of the mountains in the wooded southern areas of the Greater Caucasus Range or of urban centers, while in Russian cities, this possibility is minimal — a further reason for massive suicide attacks. The indiscriminate murder of civilians in the North Caucasus would further contribute to the alienation of sympathizers, something the separatists

cannot afford. In the case of attacks on the territory of Russia itself, this is generally not the case.

The most frequent targets of attack in the autonomous republics of the North Caucasus are the so-called *siloviki*: members of security services, the federal army, secret-service agents and especially the forces of the Interior Ministry active in the region, including both ethnic Russians and members of the local nationalities. In recent years, there have been increasing attacks against supposedly pro-regime Islamic clergy, who are fighting against the expansion of "Wahhabism" in the region, as well as against state employees, purveyors of alcohol, prostitutes, and proponents of traditional medicine, local ethno-nationalism or customary law that runs contrary to Sharia.<sup>52</sup> Especially in areas of the northwestern Caucasus, where there was once a flourishing alpine tourist industry, attacks against the local infrastructure and tourism targets are not uncommon.

## CONCLUSION

Despite years of declarations by Russian authorities of one success after another in the fight against terrorism and the liquidation of hundreds of terrorists, the situation in this volatile region of Russia has rather worsened, as is shown by the increasingly frequent terrorist and diversionary attacks carried out by local Islamists in both the North Caucasus and the Russian interior. It is true to a certain extent that the indiscriminate and ill-conceived methods of the federal and local authorities in the fight against terrorism have so far instead tended to encourage terrorism and boost its social acceptance among some of the more radical natives of the North Caucasus. The lethality of the attacks is also increasing, as is their indiscriminate nature. Terrorists today do not hesitate to attack the civilian population, especially in Russia proper.

The overall worsening of the terrorist threat is caused to a great extent by the expansion of the armed conflict from within the borders of Chechnya to the autonomous North Caucasus republics, leading to a greater level of participation by Dagestanis, Ingush, Kabardeys, Balkars and members of other nationalities in the Islamist insurgency. This territorial expansion has been accompanied by a noticeable change in the ideological basis of the resistance. In the course of the past decade, the once dominant Chechen separatism has been replaced by a militant form of Salafism: jihadism. Meanwhile, the politicization of Islam is a visible phenomenon in all of the North Caucasus republics. One might say that it represents the possibility of overcoming local (ethnic, subethnic, clan, tariqa, etc.) loyalties and creating a uniform segment of regional identity. In this respect, it is a continuation of the politicization of Islam from the late Soviet and early post-Soviet periods. In many cases, however, local Islam, including Islam with a Salafi undertone, has absorbed an ethno-separatist nationalistic feel, which still persists in one form or another. An example is the Chechen branch of the Caucasus Emirate, which has been experiencing a schism in recent months.

The region still has institutions ensuring effective social mobilization and constant recruiting of new members for the resistance movement: the persistence of archaic customs (the concepts of male honor, blood feuds, etc.) and social organization (the clan arrangement), which apply in particular to the case of the northeastern Caucasus. Regardless of the declared efforts of the federal government, the region has not yet been successfully revitalized socioeconomically; the high levels of corruption, clientelism and unemployment provide the resistance movement with appropriate social conditions for recruiting more and more members. Given these circumstances, one may expect the Islamist-driven resistance in the North Caucasus to persist for the foreseeable future, in spite of occasional successes by the federal security forces.

<sup>1</sup> This article was supported by the Research Plan of the Faculty of Social Sciences of Charles University in Prague MSM0021620841.

<sup>2</sup> Rosbalt.ru, February 21, 2010, accessed May 9, 2010, <http://www.rosbalt.ru/style/2010/02/21/714085.html>.

<sup>3</sup> BBC Russian Service, April 27, 2001, accessed May 10, 2011, [http://www.bbc.co.uk/russian/russia/2011/04/110427\\_chaika\\_speech\\_terror.html](http://www.bbc.co.uk/russian/russia/2011/04/110427_chaika_speech_terror.html).

<sup>4</sup> The Security Council of the Russian Federation, *The Strategy of the National Security of the Russian Federation Adopted on May 12, 2009*, accessed May 1, 2011, <http://www.scrf.gov.ru/documents/99.html>.



<sup>5</sup> As of yet, Sunni Islam is the religion of about a quarter of the North Ossetians (with the remainder of them professing Orthodox Christianity) and of all native North Caucasians.

<sup>6</sup> It is worth mentioning that part of the North Caucasians, particularly Christian Ossetians and some segments of North Caucasian nobility, largely refrained from resisting Russia's thrust into the area.

<sup>7</sup> See Anna Zelkina, *In Quest for God and Freedom: Sufi Responses to the Russian Advance in the North Caucasus* (New York Press, 2001).

<sup>8</sup> The nineteenth century saw a massive immigration of Russian colonists, Cossacks and members of some other predominantly Slavic groups into the vast fertile areas of the northwestern Caucasus, especially of what are now the Krasnodar and Stavropol provinces. Simultaneously, hundreds of thousands of members of native ethnicities who survived previous wars and rebellions (particularly of Adyghe descent) were either expelled from the region to the Ottoman Empire or left their homeland voluntarily.

<sup>9</sup> It was separatists among the Chechens who held out the longest, until the first half of the 1940s.

<sup>10</sup> See Abdurakhman Avtorkhanov, "The Chechens and Ingush during the Soviet Period and Its Ascendants," in *The North Caucasus Barrier: The Russian Advance towards the Muslim World*, ed. Marie Bennigsen-Broxup, (Barnes and Noble, 1992), 188-193.

<sup>11</sup> Valery Pivovarov, "Sotsiologicheskie issledovaniya problema byta, kultury, natsionalnykh traditsii i verovaniy v Checheno-Ingushetskoi ASSR," *Voprosy Nauchnogo Ateizma* (Moscow), Vol. 17 (1975): 316.

<sup>12</sup> See, for instance, Emil Souleimanov, "Chechnya, Wahhabism and the Invasion of Dagestan," *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 9, no. 5, (2005): 48-71.

<sup>13</sup> These forces have come to be known the *kadyrovtsy*, named after their founding leader, Akhmad Kadyrov, and subsequently his son Ramzan.

<sup>14</sup> According to Transparency International's 2010 Corruption Perceptions Index, Russia is the world's most corrupt major economy, sliding to 154 out of 178 countries, alongside Tajikistan and Kenya. Emma O'Brien, "Russia Most Corrupt G-20 Nation in Transparency Index," *Business Week*, October 26, 2010.

<sup>15</sup> Mark Kramer, "Prospects for Islamic Radicalism and Violent Extremism in the North Caucasus and Central Asia," *PONARS Eurasia Memo No. 28* (August 2008): 3, accessed April 18, 2011, [http://www.gwu.edu/~ieresgwu/assets/docs/pepm\\_028.pdf](http://www.gwu.edu/~ieresgwu/assets/docs/pepm_028.pdf).

<sup>16</sup> Polit.ru, September 15, 2010, accessed April 17, 2011, <http://www.polit.ru/news/2010/09/15/rassel.html>.

<sup>17</sup> Kevin Daniel Leahy, "North Caucasian Rebels' Economic Policy Defined by Conventionality and Wishful Thinking," *The Central Asia and Caucasus Analyst* (February 2, 2011), accessed April 19, 2011, <http://www.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/5487>.

<sup>18</sup> In this connection one should mention in particular the establishment in early 2010 of the North Caucasus Federal District (NCFD), encompassing not only the ethnically autonomous regions of that part of Russia, but also the Stavropol province that is inhabited by a Russian majority.

<sup>19</sup> For a critical analysis of the federal center's recent economic initiatives in the region, see, for instance, Sergey Markedonov, "Reformy ot Khloponina" [in Russian], Politcom.ru, May 15, 2010, accessed March 5, 2011, <http://www.politcom.ru/article.php?id=10111>.

<sup>20</sup> See, for instance, Neil J. Melvin, "Building Stability in the North Caucasus. Ways Forward for Russia and the European Union," *SIPRI Policy Paper No. 16* (May 2007): 15-17, 26-28, 43-44.

<sup>21</sup> See, for instance, Bruce Grant, *The Captive and the Gift: Cultural Histories of Sovereignty in Russia and the Caucasus* (Cornell University Press, 2009), 124-155.

<sup>22</sup> Dmitry Trenin, Alexey Malashenko and Anatol Lieven, *Russia's Restless Frontier: The Chechnya Factor in Post-Soviet Russia* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2004), 60-62. In this regards, recent waves of anti-Caucasian pogroms across Russia deserve attention with the culminating beating of ethnic Caucasians on December 11, 2010, on Moscow's Manezhnaya Square – that is, 50 meters from the Kremlin.

<sup>23</sup> Author's personal interview with Kazbek Ozrokov, one of the leading figures of the Adyghe nationalist organization *Adyghe Khase*, Nalchik, Kabardino-Balkaria, Russia, and with a number of other nationalist leaders in Dagestan, Ingushetia, and Kabardino-Balkaria in April 2005.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> For more detail see, for instance, Emil Souleimanov, *An Endless War: The Russian-Chechen Conflict in Perspective* (Peter Lang, 2007), 52-68.

<sup>26</sup> Sergey Markedonov, "The Caucasus Cauldron," *The Journal of International Security Affairs* (Fall 2010): 126.

<sup>27</sup> On North Caucasian Islam as a whole, see, for example, Aleksey Malashenko, *Islamskie orientiry Severnogo Kavkaza* (Moscow: Gendalf, 2001).

<sup>28</sup> Aleksey Malashenko, *Islamskie Orientiry Severnogo Kavkaza*, 104-126.

<sup>29</sup> It is not without interest that, according to a recent sociological survey carried out in Kabardino-Balkaria, 39 percent of respondents have sympathies toward Salafism. "39% of Respondents in Kabardino-Balkaria Sympathize with Wahhabism," *The Caucasus Times*, May 31, 2010, accessed April 19, 2011, <http://www.caucasustimes.com/article.asp?language=2&id=20224>. According to Islam Tekushev, one of the organizers of the survey, the core of those siding with Salafism consists of young males ranging in age between 20 and 25.

<sup>30</sup> This mobilization scheme is detailed in Emil Souleimanov, "Dagestan: The Emerging Core of North Caucasian Insirgency," *The Central Asia and Caucasus Analyst*, August 29, 2010, accessed April 18, 2011, <http://www.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/5415>. See also Andrew C. Kuchins, Matthew Malarkey and Sergey Markedonov, *The North Caucasus: Russia's Volatile Frontier* (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2011), March Report, 13.

<sup>31</sup> Naturally, this topic has traditionally belonged to the strongest social taboos in the region as individuals, families and clans that consider themselves offended rarely spread information about the facts of an actual offence, tending to maintain the utmost secrecy in order to be able to carry out an unrushed retaliation without being confronted by state reprisals.

<sup>32</sup> For more information on *adat* and the custom of blood feud practiced by the Chechens and some other North Caucasian peoples, see Emil Souleimanov, *An Endless War: The Russian-Chechen Conflict in Perspective* (Peter Lang, 2007), 24-39. See also Zeyno Baran, S. Frederick Starr and Svante E. Cornell, *Islamic Radicalism in Central Asia and the Caucasus: Implications for the EU*, The Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program Paper (July 2006): 45-46.

<sup>33</sup> It is true that in present-day Chechnya, where public life is under the strict control of the *kadyrovtsy*, and where after two bloody wars and constant purges, ordinary people are striving for a peaceful life under whatever kind of government, many Chechens have deferred revenge until "better times" as a matter of mere physical survival. Many Dagestanis, Ingush, Kabardeys or Balkars, on the other hand, are euphorically welcoming the opportunity of getting revenge for their domination by people that they utterly despise.

<sup>34</sup> Newsru.com, accessed April 20, 2011, <http://www.newsru.com/russia/31oct2007/umarov.html>.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> In May 2009, the North Ossetia vilayet was formally abolished and its territory incorporated into the vilayet of Ingushetia.

<sup>37</sup> Formally established in May 2009, the Majlis ul-shura is the major advisory organ of the Caucasus Emirate as it involves valis and emirs of the strongest and most numerous jamaats. The election of the emir of the emirate belongs to the most important competence of the Majlis that otherwise rather resembles a general staff.

<sup>38</sup> The emirate also has formally established its own foreign relations agency – the *vekalat* – and a security intelligence service called the *mukhabarata*.

<sup>39</sup> As quoted by Radio Liberty/Radio Free Europe, March 8, 2005.

<sup>40</sup> Interestingly, in the period of 2004-05 the separatists had to formally deal with three fronts, all of them nearly confined to the borders of the former Chechen-Ingush Republic, that is, the Western front (Ingushetia), the Northern front (Grozny and surroundings), the Eastern front (Gudermes and surroundings).

<sup>41</sup> For more on these raids, see Carolynne Wheeler and Nick Paton Walsh, "Dozens Killed in Raid by Chechen Rebels on Ingushetia," *The Guardian*, June 23, 2004; and Jean-Christophe Peuch, "Russia: Situation Remains Tense in Kabardino-Balkaria," Radio Liberty/Radio Free Europe, October 13, 2005, accessed April 30, 2011, <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1062095.html>.

<sup>42</sup> During the intense, pitched battles of 2000, the core of the Ichkerian Army was liquidated, and some of the nationalistically minded fighters who survived went over to the *kadyrovtsy*, in part because of disputes with the leadership of the resistance, with the exception of Aslan Maskhadov and a number of other field commanders. See Emil Souleimanov, *An Endless War*, 189-227.

<sup>43</sup> This shift is symbolically best represented by the addition to the flag of the Caucasus Emirate of the *shahada*, that is, the Islamic confession of religion written in Arabic script, whereas the former flag of secular Chechen Republic of Ichkeria lacked any religious attributes.

<sup>44</sup> Regnum.ru, October 31, 2007.

<sup>45</sup> Newsru.com, accessed April 20, 2011, <http://www.newsru.com/russia/31oct2007/umarov.html>.

<sup>46</sup> Kevin Daniel Leahy, "From Racketeer to Emir: A Political Portrait of Doku Umarov, Russia's Most Wanted Man," *Caucasian Review of International Affairs* 4, no.3, (Summer 2010): 261.

<sup>47</sup> An interesting insight into the rhetoric of North Caucasian jihadists is presented in "Imarat Kavkaz. Ogon sviashchennogo jihada [The Caucasus Emirate. The Fire of Holy Jihad]," May 1, 2011, accessed May 2, 2011, <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/russ/content/2011/05/01/81196.shtml>.

<sup>48</sup> Newsru.com, accessed May 5, 2011, <http://www.newsru.com/russia/31oct2007/umarov.html>.

<sup>49</sup> For more detail on the issue, see Emil Souleimanov, "Umarov's Non(resignation): Is the North Caucasus Insurgency Becoming Divided?" *The Central Asia and Caucasus Analyst* (August 19, 2010), accessed May 15, 2011, <http://www.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/5383>.

<sup>50</sup> Jamaats are widely believed to be sponsored by *zakats*, that is, donations by sympathizers of the Islamist insurgency from both the region and outside of it, or money extorted from a range of local businesses.

<sup>51</sup> See Andrew McGregor, "Islam, Jamaats and Implications for the North Caucasus," *Terrorism Monitor* 4, no. 12, June 15, 2006, accessed May 1, 2011, <http://jamestown.org/terrorism/news/article.php?articleid=2370014>.

<sup>52</sup> In this regard, the assassinations of the mufti of Kabardino-Balkaria, Anas Pshikhachev, in December 2010 and of Aslan Tsipinov, a prominent ethnologist, in March 2011 are symptomatic. Tsipinov was famous in the republic for his attempts to push forward the revitalization of archaic values among the Adyghe ethnicities, notably the highly complex codex of etiquette and customary law called *Adyghe Khabze*; importantly, he never hesitated to criticize Islam as an alien segment of the Adyghe identity and even described neighboring Karachays and Balkars as relative newcomers to the area, a low-status group vis-à-vis the indigenous and cultivated Adyghe peoples. So Tsipinov was

considered a champion of *jahiliyya*, pre-Islamic paganism and heresy, and his public efforts further widened the ethno-nationalist split between the Adyghe and Turkic populations. This was not in the interest of Islamist insurgents. As for the pro-regime mufti Pshikhachev, he was regarded as one of the ideological fathers of the authorities' fierce anti-Salafi activities, which earned him public acclaim in the republic for his attacks against the adherents of "Wahhabism."

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