

ANALYSIS

Religious Identity and Conflict in Dagestan

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Abstract

This article examines the links between religious identity and the on-going insurgency in Dagestan. It explains why the Salafi continue to feel aggrieved and struggle against established religious leaders who are backed by the Russian state.

Towards Understanding the Salafi Identity Construction

The spread of the Salafi movement in Dagestan began in the 1970s. Due to the restrictions imposed on religion and as a consequence of the secret nature of the Salafi group, there was no public discourse on Salafism during the Soviet period. A new page for the movement started in the early 1990s following the collapse of the communist regime. A group of Salafi preachers spoke out for peaceful means of propounding Islam and for a dialogue with the government and representatives of Sufi Islam. The most prominent individual among them was Akhmed Kadi Akhtaev, the Chairman of the Islamic Revival Party, founded in 1990. The second branch of the Islamic Revival Party, led by Bagauddin Kebedov, is known for preaching ideas that are incompatible with the Russian secular state. Later Kebedov played an active role in the incursion into Dagestan by militant groups (Jihadi-Salafists among them) from the adjacent Chechnya in 1999. After the extension of the conflict from Chechnya to Dagestan, researchers observed a positive correlation between Salafism and violent incidents. In August 1999 insurgents took control of four villages in Bujnaski District (Kadar Zone), announced a “separate Islamic territory” and enforced Sharia laws. After the visit of the Russian Minister of Internal Affairs Sergei Stepashin to the Kadar Zone in August 1998, the explosive situation promised a peaceful resolution. Both sides reached a verbal agreement not to challenge each other’s mutual authority and to adhere to nonviolence. However, upon Stepashin’s return to Moscow, the Kremlin opted for a military approach to responding to the Salafi challenge. The deployment of heavy arms drove insurgents out of the Zone in September 1999.

Salafi is interchangeable with Wahhabi in Russian public discourse. The latter has obtained a negative connotation since Wahhabism is legally forbidden and the term refers to a foreign Saudi element which is often considered extremist. According to the Norwegian researcher of violent Islamism Thomas Hegghammer, both Salafism and Wahhabism do not represent a political doctrine, but a theological tradition.

Parallel to these events in August 1999 the joint Chechen-Dagestani insurgent Islamic International Peacekeeping Brigade, led by Emir Khattab of Saudi

origin, crossed the Dagestani border from Chechnya. Fighters announced the creation of a Pan-Caucasian Islamic state as their ultimate goal denying the authority of the Russian state and the local secular institutions by doing so. The Center for Strategic International Studies reports connections between insurgents in Dagestan and the international terrorist movement during this period. Along with tactical support and funding through benevolent organizations, such external involvement included foreign militants. Ground operations and fights between the state military forces and insurgents lasted for two months until the Brigade withdrew back to Chechnya.

For the Salafi movement the peculiarities of both events in the Kadar Zone and at the Chechen–Dagestani border marked the point of no return in their battle for freedom of religious expression within Russian borders. In September 1999 the Dagestani parliament adopted a law prohibiting any Salafi activities in response to the deteriorating security situation. Secular and religious officials framed Salafists as terrorists, who were both radical and violent, while the media noted that their adherence to Sharia laws was incompatible with Russian secular laws.

During the subsequent years Salafists from Dagestan were held accountable for numerous insurgent activities in the republic and in Moscow. The war evolved from positional battles during the incursion from Chechnya in 1999 to guerilla warfare. Beyond underground activities in villages and cities, insurgents set up ammunition storage locations in the highlands and trained recruits in mobile camps. Numerous attacks were directed against civilian and military human targets in populated areas. The most famous incidents of the conflict in Dagestan killed 42 civilians during a Victory Day parade in the city Kaspiysk in 2002, and claimed the life of Dagestani Interior Minister Adilgeri Magomedtagirov in 2009. In Moscow fighters carried out suicide attacks in public spaces like a metro station in 2010 and Domodedovo airport in 2011. One of the portraits of violence is the increased number of victims among Sufi imams and Sheikhs since the escalation in 2010. The two prominent sheikhs, Sirazutdin Khurikskiy and Said Afandi Chirkeyskiy, were assassinated respectively in 2011 and 2012. In 2013 the conflict killed at least 341 persons and injured 300 in Dagestan alone.

Since 2007 the insurgent movement in the Caucasus has been connected to the Caucasus Emirate—a self-proclaimed Islamic state within the North Caucasus borders. The Emirate is composed of seven territorial units, one of which is the Dagestan Vilayat. This Vilayat includes a number of smaller units—djamaats. As many as a dozen djamaats were reported to be active in Dagestan during the period 1999–2012. Unfortunately, there is little information on the exact numbers and structures because of the constant changes within these groups. Responsibility for these violent activities is attributed to one of these units, which operates across Dagestan in the highlands and plains, including areas that are inhabited by most of the ethnic groups living in the republic. It is not possible to blame the violence on one particular ethnic group to the exclusion of the others.

Clearly, the conflict in Chechnya has encouraged the spread of the Salafi doctrine in both its regular and jihadi forms in neighboring Dagestan. Experiences in Chechnya predetermined the way the state countered Salafism in the country, in general, and in Dagestan, in particular.

Sufi–Salafi Antagonism

Probably one of the most far reaching consequences of the collapse of the Soviet Union in Dagestan was the revival of Islam. As Cracow University of Economics researcher of Islam in the Caucasus Dobrosława Wiktor-Mach has noted, the contemporary worldwide Islamic revival encompasses various processes (Wiktor-Mach 2011: 395). In Dagestan scholars have recognized two outstanding processes in this regard: the revival of traditional Sufi Islam and the proliferation of Salafi Islam. Transformation of religious identities in Dagestani society in this period should be considered along with the associated developments inside these currents. Two polar examples on this subject are the radicalization of traditional Sufi Islam, on the one hand, and the development of political Salafi Islam, on the other. The complexities of these developments within the different branches of Islam have not been fully addressed in the public discourse, which describes the conflict in a simplified manner as the sectarian division between Salafi and Sufi Islam. In the following section, I outline how tensions between the Sufi clergy and newcomers emerged. In order to do so, I first describe the conditions under which religious interaction evolved. Then, the defining ideas of the Salafi doctrine are presented, which help us to understand the nature of the alienation.

By 1998 an estimated 5–7 percent of the population practiced Salafism in Dagestan. The rapid spread of Salafism since then is associated with growing contacts made by young Dagestani students in the Middle East and various exchanges with the Muslim world. Equipped with

rich knowledge on religion in the Islamic world, Salafists were successful in promoting their ideas. Without sufficient competence in the Arabic language, Sufi religious clerics appeared incompetent in religious disputes compared to the younger generation, which had been educated in the Arab world. In the struggle for power and influence, the Sufi clergy relied on the full support of the state authorities. The republican leadership and religious officialdom created the Spiritual Board of the Muslims of Dagestan (SBMD). This institution is known for its deeply embedded hierarchy and exclusionary personnel policy. It is dependent on the state authorities and, accordingly, led the rhetorical fight against Salafism during recent decades. This factor has strongly affected the instrumental marginalization and delegitimization attempts against Salafists. Despite this persecution and the authorities' efforts to deny it the right to exist, the movement has survived. Salafi mosques appeared in cities and villages parallel to Sufi and popular Islam's places of worship; public arguments between scholars of the two schools became common. By 2010 the newly appointed Dagestani President Magomedov's more moderate approach to the Salafi issue coincided with the tolerated public appearance of the Salafi organization Ahlu-Sunna.

Despite the uniting ideal of the sharia state shared by most Sufis and Salafists, a division based on distinctive perceptions of identities between both currents is apparent. The cleavage lay in the essence of Salafi preaching, which denounces Sufism as an illegitimate way of practicing Islam. One of the basic features of Salafism is the struggle against *bid'a*—new elements of late Islamic origin. Many Sufi practices, like veneration of saints or celebration of the prophet's birthday, count, according to Salafists, as illegitimate innovations in Islam. Not only is the conflict between both currents based on differences in theological interpretations, the aggravation of the cleavage happened thanks to the close ties of Sufi Islam with the state-controlled religious institutional structure. Local elites, many of whom hold membership in a Sufi school or are related to the structures of the SBMD, made sure that one-sided anti-Salafi rhetoric and politics stayed on the agenda. Not to be forgotten is the role played in the public discourse by state-controlled media, which contributed to the aggravated perception of the division through the enforcement of an "us" and "them" dichotomy. The division between Sufism and Salafism finds expression at the local level of villages, where neighbors can attend either Sufi or Salafi mosques. Religious disputes have become a source of arguments dividing families between children and parents.

Jean-François Ratelle, who conducted ethnographic research in Dagestan, describes how in recent decades the Salafi social world has developed. In the matter of

physical appearance, Salafis distinguish themselves by a specific clothing style. Due to the nature of the Salafi doctrine and its alienation from other groups, its followers express their identity more strongly than adherents of Sufism. In general, external actors play an important role in shaping tensions between Sufi and Salafi forms of Islam. The ideological differences have been instrumentally accumulated and exacerbated in order to legitimize state security policies in the region.

Despite the governmental repressions and frequent opposition from the civilian population, the Salafi group has been gaining more supporters. The shared Salafi identity and feelings of persecution appear to be a uniting force within this network.

Targeted Persecution against the Salafi Movement

Many reports of human rights organizations describe how an individual's Salafi religious identity may make them a target of repeated police abuse and persecution on a daily basis. Much of the current practices of the local law enforcement forces are the legacy of the Chechen Wars. The same patterns of forced, extrajudicial killings, gruesome methods of torture at police stations and prisons have been reported and documented by local journalists and human rights advocates in Dagestan (the NGO Pravozashita and the internet Portal Kavkaz-uzel.ru are the two most prominent among them). These practices are the one key factor why insurgents are reluctant to put their arms down during the so called anti-terrorist operation, even when they face choosing between surrendering and being killed. Only in a small number of cases (total 46 since 2010) have individuals related to the insurgency been given a chance to go through a special commission of reintegration and a court trial to eventually return to civilian life.

As is the case in a civil war, the victims of the abuse extend beyond jihadi Salafists. Since the legal prohibition of Wahhabism in 1999, the fight against the movement has evolved on institutional and individual levels. Any person, who has been noticed visiting Salafi mosques, finds himself in a risk category for police repression. Physical signs, such as displaying Salafi dress styles, like men wearing beards or short pants, constitute grounds for police to interrogate individuals. In the case of women, a black abaya or veiled face are encountered with apprehension by people and suspicion by security forces. The most infamous strategies of the struggle against Salafists included efforts to eliminate physical signs of Salafi identity. As one example, local police used discriminate violence to forcefully shave the beards of approximately 150 visitors to the mosque in the village Sovetskoje in 2011. Also facing the dan-

ger of being persecuted are family members of the former and current insurgents and Salafists. Ratelle found that even persons showing strong religious devotion are exposed to becoming victims of targeted religious profiling and abuse. As a result, the repression against individuals of Salafi identity produces a highly antagonistic social context in which the continuation of the vicious cycle of violence is favored.

Conclusion

The religious component is a key factor which cannot be overlooked when analyzing the conflict in Dagestan. This article set out to investigate the underlying conditions explaining the construction of a violent religious identity. Since the violence is attributed to one Salafi identity group, the task was to give an insight into the mechanism that allowed linking the current conflict in Dagestan and the religious identity of Salafists.

My observations suggest that since the onset of the Chechen war, religious identities in Dagestan have experienced unprecedented transformations. Some processes, such as the appearance of various currents in Islam, emerged directly after the collapse of the Soviet state. The spread of Salafism is a process that was launched by the general revival of Islam. The violent developments in Chechnya and later in Dagestan shaped the peculiarities of the movement in Dagestan. From the very start of the conflict, the moderate wing of the movement found itself with no public voice. During the later stages, the construction and the public perception of the Salafi identity group were influenced and even directed by the political elites.

The findings of this article suggest that the established public and, in some instances, academic discourse labeling the Salafists does not reflect the actual involvement of the group members in incidences of violence. Only the minority Jihadi-Salafists participate in violent activities, while the majority Salafi group is the victim of repression and persecution. Furthermore, the labeling contributes to the maintaining of the division between Salafism and Sufism. This phenomenon, in connection with other explanations, is the facilitator in the conflict. Structural conditions exacerbated by triggering factors may motivate young men, who are not necessarily ideologically committed, to join the insurgency.

Religion was often used in the Caucasus to rally people. Sufi leaders used it to mobilize the oppressed peoples of Dagestan in the 19th century. Once again religious ideology, this time Salafism, is being exploited to unite young men behind the insurgency.

Please find information about the author and tips for further reading overleaf.

About the Author

Manarsha Isaeva has just completed BA in Political Science at the Free University of Berlin and works at the Society for Threatened Peoples in Berlin.

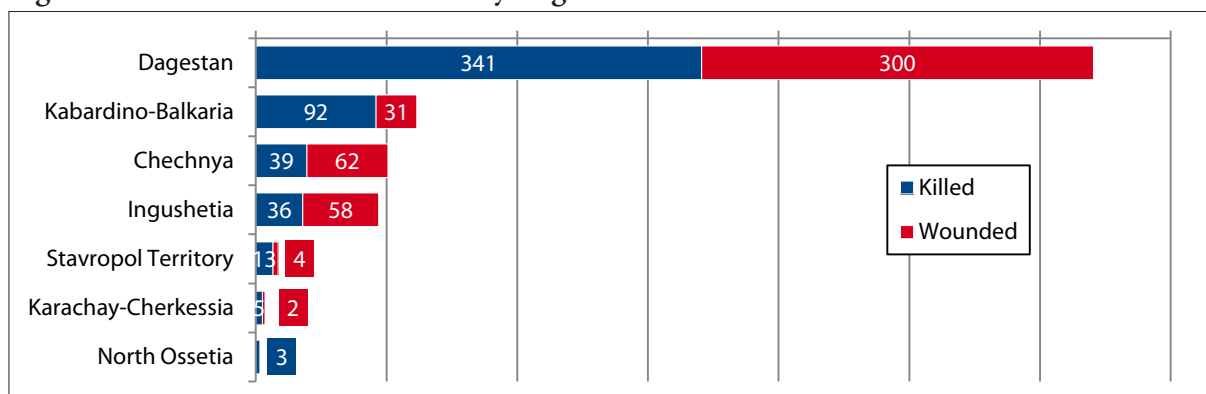
Further Reading:

- Ratelle, Jean-François (2013): Radical Islam and the Chechen War Spillover: a Political Ethnographic Reassessment of the Upsurge of Violence in the North Caucasus since 2009. PhD Thesis. University of Ottawa.
- Ware, Robert &. Kisriev Enver (2003): Political Islam in Dagestan. In *Europe-Asia Studies* 55 (2), pp. 287–302.

STATISTICS

Victims of the Conflict in the North Caucasus 2013

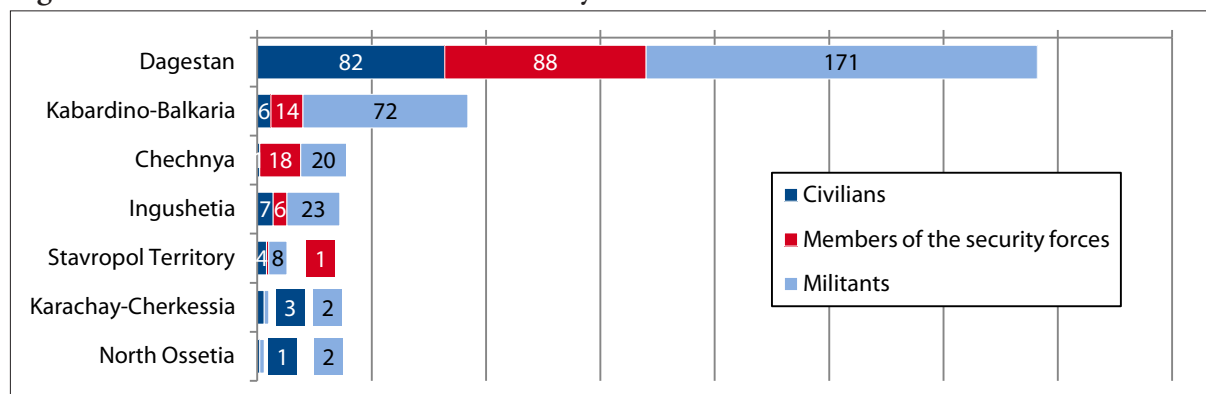
Figure 1: Total Numbers of Victims by Region



Total number of victims: 986; total number of wounded: 457; total number of killed: 529.

Source: <<http://eng.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/27109/>>

Figure 2: Total Numbers of Killed Persons by Status



Total number of killed persons: 529; total number of civilians killed: 104; total number of members of the security forces killed: 127; total numbers of militants killed: 298.

Source: <<http://eng.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/27109/>>