

it, such a step would have posed dangers of its own. The hundreds of Chechen guerrillas who accepted Kadyrov's proposal to change sides in 2006 might decide in his absence to turn back to violent anti-government actions. Indeed, several dozen have already done precisely that, rejoining the several hundred Chechen fighters who are still operating, mostly in the southern mountains. Moreover, the Kadyrovtsy, if suddenly deprived of their long-time leader, could easily wreak havoc in Chechnya and clash with other security forces.

At the very least, Kadyrov's departure would usher in a period of uncertainty in Chechnya and give an opportunity for radical elements to regroup. On the other hand, if Kadyrov remains in power indefinitely, the cruelty and intolerance of his government might eventually precipitate a backlash. Even if large-scale fighting does not recur, Chechnya will continue to be a highly volatile and dangerous component of the Russian Federation for many years to come.

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Analysis

Separatism and Islamic Extremism in the Ethnic Republics of the North Caucasus

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Abstract

The ethnic republics of the North Caucasus remain a headache and source of alarm for Russia's central government. Moscow's efforts to improve the political climate and the economic situation have not produced the desired results. Today Moscow must support a significant number of intelligence, military, and police personnel in this strategically important region. As the federal government cuts the number of its troops in Chechnya, the number of forces subordinate to Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov is growing. At the same time, the successful efforts to forcibly remove the separatist fighters from Chechnya during the past few years, has pushed them outside the borders of the Chechen republic. The drop in the number of separatist military operations in Chechnya has been accompanied by a growth in such operations in other North Caucasus republics, particularly Dagestan and Ingushetia, which border Chechnya.

The Separatist Underground

The suppression of the separatist rebel fighters in Chechnya has forced them to move to other republics in the North Caucasus. Today they are creating and expanding their own networks in Dagestan, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, and Karachayevo-Cherkessia. The main centers of these networks are not only the mountainous regions, as one would expect, but large cities, such as Makhachkala, Khasavyurt, Kizlyar, Nalchik, Cherkessk, Karachayevsk, and others. The recent actions taken by the Russian force ministries against these separatists, including the use of heavy weapons in the mountainous parts of the region, provide evidence that these conflicts have yet to disappear.

Currently, we are witnessing a major restructuring of the separatist underground in the North Caucasus that is taking place under the pressure of changing circumstances. This restructuring includes the distribution of forces across a maximally wide territory and the creation of a network structure, in which the nodes are formally autonomous, but are able to communicate with each other to coordinate their actions using various agents and electronic means of communication. In setting up this network, the fighters are focusing on disgruntled local residents, especially those who have been abused by the local law enforcement agencies. Unfortunately, the republican police in Dagestan, Ingushetia, and Kabardino-Balkaria in the 1990s and early 2000s carried out

numerous mistaken repressive actions against a wide range of practicing Muslims, instilling them with a desire to protest. The separatists have been able to exploit these mistakes by the local authorities to recruit additional numbers of active fighters and agents. In particular, they succeeded in attracting to their side one of the influential leaders of the Jamaat of Karbardino-Balkaria Anzor Astemirov, who is now known as Emir Seifullakh.

The separatists' underground network is extremely mobile. The separatists frequently change their bases, carry out terrorist acts, and then quickly regroup elsewhere. This mobility gives each unit a high degree of autonomy. At the same time, it is clear that there is a certain logic to the separatist actions in all of the North Caucasus republics, which suggests that there is some kind of coordinating structure. Rather than being a type of "general staff" of all the separatists located in one place, this structure is also spread out over space so that it would be impossible to destroy it in one operation. The wide distribution of resources makes it extremely difficult for the authorities to effectively subdue this movement.

The strong opposition put up by the North Caucasus separatists and their ability to inflict great pain by their terrorist acts demonstrates that the movement is well equipped with arms. They are able to acquire flame-throwers and explosives to carry out acts of intimidation. One of the basic goals of their leaders is to preserve the movement; therefore they do rarely militarily attack the federal troops, which enjoy superiority. These military acts have propagandistic goals and seek to show the federal authorities and local population that the underground is alive and able to wage an armed struggle. Thus, the rebels speak about various "fronts" where they conduct "battle", but, of course, there are no such fronts in a geographical sense because there is no ongoing and direct military confrontation between the Russian forces and the fighters. The fighters are essentially using partisan methods.

Not all of the armed rebels squeezed out of Chechnya are working to set up an underground in neighboring republics. Many of the rebels are Dagestanis, returning to their native republic. In contrast to their Chechen colleagues, they cannot legalize their status utilizing the amnesties that are announced from time to time. With their ability to fight, they do not remain without work. Instead they become the core of "personal armed groups" working for various important people. Such units can be used in a wide variety of situations: as body guards to settling scores with competitors. In particular, several

legislators at the republican and local levels employ these fighters. Public officials in the executive branch have also found use for them.

Islamist Jamaats

The organizational structure of the separatist societies, jamaats, does not coincide with the structure of traditional Muslim societies in the region, which are also called jamaats. The traditional jamaats are organized along territorial principles, incorporating the population of a village or city district grouped around a mosque. The separatist jamaats are extra-territorial and dispersed. One jamaat can encompass many small groups, united in one or several networks. One example is the Dagestani jamaat "Shariat." It was created on the basis of loyalty to the ideology and practice of the separatist movement. In principle, these jamaats do not represent any kind of united association. Their structure includes de facto autonomous groups, made up of a small number of members who frequently are not acquainted with the members of the other cells. It is particularly difficult to unravel such a network since finding one cell usually does not lead to uncovering others. While it is difficult to manage such a network, its advantage in the current situation is clear: this kind of organization helps the entire network to survive.

The membership of the separatist jamaats is diverse. Their base is the Muslim youth of the region and recently there has been an alarming trend in this regard. With greater frequency, young intellectuals are joining the Islamist movements. One example is the Dagestani Abuzagir Mantayev, who defended his candidate's degree in Political Science on the topic of Wahhabism in Moscow and then turned up in the ranks of the extremists. Mantayev was killed together with other extremists by security forces in Makhachkala on October 9, 2005. Another example is Makhach Rasulov (better known as Yasin). Rasulov, born in 1975, graduated from Dagestan State University (DGU), knew French and Arabic well and studied for a time as a grad student in the department of religious studies at DGU, though he did not finish his degree. He worked as a religious columnist for the newspaper *Novoye delo* and then anchored a religious show on Dagestani television. Over the course of a year, he became an extremist and earned the title "Emir of Makhachkala," having participated in several audacious attacks on Dagestani policemen. On April 10, 2006, the authorities announced that they had killed him in the course of a special operation in a building on Engels' Street in Makhachkala.

This alarming trend demonstrates that extremist views are spread among the intellectual elite of Dagestani youth. Some young intellectuals in the North Caucasus republics, particularly in Dagestan, are convinced that in the current conditions, when injustice and corruption are rampant, the best response is the introduction of Sharia law. It is not only the uneducated who support these ideas, as earlier, but also those who are intellectually astute and have received a good secular education. Of course, this phenomenon also reflects social-economic and political problems. It is distressing that some young North Caucasus intellectuals have sought to solve these problems in the religious sphere.

The jamaats bring together members of different ethnic groups and countries. Usually their members are from the different ethnic groups of the North Caucasus, but there are also representatives of other countries, including Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, and the countries of the Middle East. Official Russian statements usually describe these foreigners as mercenaries, but many of them came for ideological reasons. Those who have extensive battlefield experience work as instructors. However the instructors are not always foreigners; sometimes they are just rank-and-file fighters. Through the foreigners, the groups often establish ties with donors, typically from Islamic countries. Delivery of finances and other aid to the separatists is often criminalized: for example, through these channels counterfeit money is laundered. Other types of fund-raising are also employed, such as donations from various supporters and ransoms collected from the relatives of hostages.

For propagandistic reasons, the separatists are divided into specific “battalions” organized along ethnic lines. There are for example the “Nogai,” the “Karachai,” and other ethnic battalions. In reality, no such battalions exist. Military attacks and terrorist acts attributed to one or another battalion are carried out by the members of separatist jamaats of the corresponding nationality. The “Nogai Battalion” typically includes members of the Shelkovskoy jamaat, which is based in the Shelkovskoy Raion of Chechnya and the Neftekumsky Raion of Stavropol Krai. The Shelkovskoy jamaat has conducted large-scale actions against the federal troops, including the recent clashes in the village of Tukui-Mekteb of Neftekumsky Raion. Its activity receives wide attention because raids often take place beyond the borders of the ethnic republics, angering the federal government and the residents of Stavropol

Krai. This situation is not unique, since there are other jamaats that are even stronger than the Shelkovskoy jamaat.

The Separatists’ Ideology

Today the secular nationalism of Dzhokhar Dudaev is a distant memory. The main ideology of the separatist movement in the North Caucasus is religious and is frequently called “Wahhabism” in the North Caucasus. The fundamental belief of the Wahhabis is the demand for the implementation of the principle of *tawkheed* (monotheism). This demand leads to a literal interpretation of this principle with very strict limits. The ideology of Wahhabism gives high priority to jihad, understood as an armed battle for faith against the enemies of Islam. The Islamists of the region take serious their right to declare jihad against other North Caucasus Muslims who do not support the separatists. As a result, there is extensive use of force against ethnic Muslims who serve the Russian power ministries. Policemen in Dagestan, Chechnya, Ingushetia, and the eastern parts of Stavropol Krai are among the chief targets for the terrorists. When the separatists carry out terrorist acts, there are many victims who have no relationship to the authorities. The Islamists believe that it is acceptable to kill family members of policemen and other representatives of authority since these people stay with them and therefore presumably support their position and work. A true Muslim, in their view, should disown such relatives. They also believe that any innocent by-standers killed during a terrorist act go straight to heaven.

The ideology of the separatists is an enormous problem for the Russian authorities. The secular nationalists could have compromised with Moscow, agreeing to some level of autonomy for their people and region. With today’s separatists in the North Caucasus, it is practically impossible to agree on this basis, since the separatists’ ideology does not allow compromise with the “infidels.” The state, which is the basis of human laws, should be destroyed, from their point of view. Everyone should obey God’s law. While Muslim fundamentalists see Western democracy as useful, making it possible through honest battle to convince the population about the correctness of their vision for the further development of society, the militant extremists see democracy as an evil, a human construct, harmful from the start, since it does not agree with the clear God-given instructions about the construction of society.

Understanding the Islamist basis of the current ideology of the North Caucasus separatists is very

important in understanding the goals of this movement. Today they are not fighting for the independence of Chechnya, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria or Dagestan from Russia, but for the destruction of the “infidel empire,” as they call Russia, and the creation of a Sharia-ruled territory that would ultimately serve as one of the bases for uniting all Muslims around the world in a single political space. The nationality of a person is not significant for them; they recognize only Islam. Ethnic identity is definitely subordinate to religious identity. Their picture of the future has no place for national governments; instead there should only be a united Muslim society, based on the brotherhood of all Muslims.

Structures of “Traditional Islam”

So-called “traditional Islam” is often opposed to the Islamists. What do its structures represent?

The Spiritual Board of Muslims (the muftiat) officially represents traditional Islam in the North Caucasus. Today it exists in all republics of the North Caucasus, and the muftis of Adygeya and Karachayevo-Cherkessia also control the Muslim societies in the corresponding krais – Krasnodar and Stavropol. The muftiats are formally united in one structure: the Coordinating Center of Muslims in the North Caucasus, which today is led by the mufti of Karachayevo-Cherkessia and Stavropol Krai Ismail-khadzhi Berdiev. However, in reality, these official structures do not control all Islamic societies. The Spiritual Board of Muslims (DUM) as a set of official structures is suffering a deep crisis across Russia and the North Caucasus in particular.

Many Muslim societies exist autonomously of the DUM, sometimes creating influential parallel structures. For example, in Kabardino-Balkaria during the 1990s, a significant fraction of the Muslims, particularly the youth, created the Jamaat of Kabardino-Balkaria, which was organized much more effectively than the Kabardino-Balkaria DUM and competed for spiritual power in the Muslim society of the republic. Likewise, the Karachayevo-Cherkessia and Stavropol Krai DUM does not control some of the societies in the republic and many societies in the krai. As a result, the krai authorities have even suggested separating the Stavropol societies from Berdiev’s muftiat and creating a separate DUM in Stavropol Krai. However, this idea proved unworkable because of a variety of problems, including the lack of unity among the krai’s Muslims and their inability to choose a leader capable of uniting the various Muslim societies in the region.

The level of influence for the traditional structures is not the same in all North Caucasus republics. They are strongest in the Eastern part of the region: Dagestan, Chechnya, and Ingushetia. Today, Dagestan’s religious leaders are actively asserting their influence over the authorities at all levels of government, violating the secular character of the political system in the republic and the interests of the federal center. The most obvious intervention into the political sphere is the rising influence of the Sufi shaikhs in Dagestan. The intervention is felt at all levels, from local to republican. For example, many bureaucrats in the Dagestani government are disciples of one of the most influential shaikhs, Said-afandi Chirkeevsky. One-third to one-half of the members of the republican parliament are also disciples of Sufi shaikhs. In addition to Chirkeevsky, there are several other influential shaikhs.

One sign of the growing influence of the religious lobby on the authorities is the recent abolition of the Dagestan government State Committee on Religious Affairs. This committee tracked the overall ethnic and religious situation in the republic, registered religious organizations, evaluated religious literature and publications, and issued its own handbooks and religious studies literature. The committee managed to preserve parity between various religious organizations and groups, not allowing one to grow too strong while making clear to the key players that Dagestan is a secular republic in which secular Russian laws take precedence.

Unsurprisingly, practically all Muslim organizations were dissatisfied with the work of the committee, particularly the Dagestani DUM, which wanted to have more influence on state policy. Former employees of this committee told the author of this article that there is evidence showing that the DUM actively lobbied for the closing of the committee. Following the closure, the DUM placed its people as imams in several areas, particularly the mosque in the village of Shamkhal, which is under the jurisdiction of the city of Makhachkala. In place of the former committee, there is a new department in the Dagestani Ministry of Nationalities Policy, Information, and External Ties, which naturally cannot conduct an independent policy in the area of regulating relations between the state and religion, as the former committee once did.

The Dagestani DUM’s attack on the secular character of the state is a serious problem. Its leaders frequently announce that in Dagestan it is necessary to control the media since television broadcasts pictures of “uncovered women” and it is difficult to

counter the attacks of the Wahhabis and their accusations of cooperating with the “godless state.” In their opinion, it is necessary to create a centralized system of religious education in the North Caucasus and introduce the fundamentals of religion in the state schools.

There is a deep divide among the “traditional” Muslim societies of Dagestan, and no unity among the Sufis, called “tarikatis” in this part of the Caucasus. Shaikh Said-afandi Chirkeevsky and his disciples are seeking a monopoly of power. Today they control the Dagestan DUM and claim that the other shaikhs in Dagestan are not authentic. As a result, the other shaikhs do not recognize the DUM or stand in opposition to it. These shaikhs are uniting, which could lead to the creation of a serious coalition of Sufis opposed to the DUM. Additionally, the followers of Shaikh Israfilov Serazhutdin Khuriksky of Derbent represent another major power in the region.

Thus traditional Islam in the North Caucasus is being politicized and organizational structures like the Sufi brotherhood are presenting an alternative to Wahhabism, but this alternative is also based on imposing Sharia on local society. While the Wahhabis are conducting armed battle to introduce Sharia in the region, the Sufis are gradually Islamifying society, ever more actively trying to influence all spheres of life, including politics.

The Authorities' Policy

Solving the problem of separatism, an integral part of the Islamist movement, is one of the top priorities of Russian authorities in the North Caucasus. Let us examine how they try to solve the problem of religious extremism.

The authorities today are placing their bets on traditional Islam as described above. However, in the North Caucasus, traditional Islam takes various forms. In Chechnya and Ingushetia, there is a special form of Sufism where there are no living shaikhs, only scholarship left by shaikhs who lived in the past. In Dagestan, there is the Sufism of various tarikats and non-Sufi Islam; in the other parts of the republic, there is the typical “Islam of the mosque” (not related to Sufism). This mosaic of forms of “traditional Islam” makes it difficult to choose one which could be the standard form. For the time being, the official DUM has support, but its failings are obvious – it does not control all Muslim societies in the republic. Occasionally the state comes into conflict with a much stronger and cohesive structure, as in Kabardino-Balkaria’s local youth jamaat.

Within the framework of conducting a battle with Islamic extremism, the Russian authorities have placed serious limits on many Muslim institutions. To block financial flows to radical Islamists, the activities of almost all Islamist charitable organizations were closed. This practice led to a deterioration of the financial situation of Islamic societies and ended many charitable and educational programs. There were sharp drops in Muslim book publishing and many regional newspapers and journals closed. The authorities shuttered scholarly associations where there was open propaganda of Islamist extremist ideas, but in Kabardino-Balkaria and in Karachayevo-Cherkessia, the local authorities at the end of the 1990s closed all non-official scholarly institutions, the maktabas and madrasahs. In the beginning of the 2000s, the Kabardino-Balkaria authorities also began to close the mosques. After the departure of the hated Kabardino-Balkaria Minister of Internal Affairs Khachim Shogenov and the appointment of Arsen Kanokov as the president of the republic, these mistakes were slowly corrected. However, the tension in the republic’s Muslim society has not declined.

The military actions conducted by Russian special forces are often focused and effective, especially in discovering specific groups of fighters. At the same time, they are sometimes directed against Muslims who think differently but have committed no crimes with the goal of removing them from the mosques or removing the possibility that they will become Wahhabis. While the number of such operations has dropped drastically, they are still taking place. It is obvious that in the complicated religious situation of the North Caucasus today, it is very difficult to determine the loyal groups and separate them from the ones that are not loyal, much less the ones capable of armed rebellion.

Imposing order in the system of Islamic religious education has taken on great importance for the Russian authorities since the beginning of the 2000s. Today there are 22 Islamic higher institutions of education functioning in the North Caucasus – 19 in Dagestan, one in Cherkessk, one in Nazran, and one in Nalchik. The problems with the education system have attracted the attention of presidential envoy to the North Caucasus Dmitry Kozak. His staff determined that the state should provide extensive support to develop a system of Islamic education. In June 2006, Kozak held a meeting with Caucasus muftis at which they decided to found two Islamic universities in the near future – one for the North-East Caucasus with an emphasis on the shafiite school, the other in the North-West Caucasus with an emphasis on

the khanafit school. Kozak gave instructions to develop the curriculum of these schools and determined where they would be located. In this way, the state is trying to train loyal members of the religion, but most likely such measures will not resolve the problem of Islamic education in the North Caucasus, particularly the spread of extremist brands of Islamic scholarship.

Obviously, the problem of Islamic extremism and the closely related issue of separatism can only be solved in an all-encompassing way. The solution must include the use of force, but also must deprive the extremists of a social base through the development of the economy, improving the well-being of the population, and the development of normal dialogue within the region's Islamic society by encouraging cooperation with a significant part of the Muslim youth who reject extremism. To neutralize the protest mood, the authorities are trying to conduct a change of elites in the republics and also show decisiveness in fighting corruption and the ineffectiveness of the local economy. Replacing the leaders of Dagestan, Adygeya, and Kabardino-Balkaria, demonstrative actions against corrupt officials, and the development of tourism and other economic projects are well received by the local population. Given the deep crisis this region is facing, cosmetic measures are clearly insufficient. In the North Caucasus, it is

necessary to conduct systematic reforms, something that the federal government is having a hard time deciding to do.

No less important is the development of a civil form of identity: Muslim youth react very poorly to the growth in Russia of an anti-Caucasus mood. The integration of the Muslims of the North Caucasus into the broader civil society is not moving forward with enough decisiveness and speed.

In sum, there has been a change of the ideological base of the separatist movement in the North Caucasus. Starting as an overwhelmingly nationalist movement on the territory of Chechnya, it has transformed to a religious Islamist network. Today, the ranks of the separatists are filled not only with Chechens, but representatives of other North Caucasus peoples as well. They are fighting against the current authorities in order to create an Islamist state. The federal and local authorities must address the socio-economic problems of the region as well as the spread of religious extremism, particularly among the youth. In doing this, it will be difficult for them to use the traditional Islamic structures of the region, partly because they are weak (as in Kabardino-Balkaria) and partly because of their politicization (as in Dagestan).

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Further reading:

- Neil J. Melvin, *Building Stability in the North Caucasus: Ways Forward for Russia and the European Union*, SIPRI Policy Paper No. 16 (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, May 2007), <http://www.sipri.org/contents/publications/Policypaper16.html>.
- Jeronim Perovic, *The North Caucasus on the Brink*, ISN Case Study (Zurich, International Relations and Security Network, 29 August 2006), <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/pubs/ph/details.cfm?id=15316>.