

representative at the meeting of the Islamic Conference Organization of 2000 had invoked the “right of self-determination” for the “Muslim people of Chechnya.” This has now ceased.

### **Moscow’s Stance Toward Israel and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict**

In the past four to five years, Russia has reactivated its attempts to play a mediating role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on grounds that have brought it closer to many Arab and Muslim countries. Prior to and shortly after 9/11, Russia had achieved a noteworthy rapprochement with Israel, particularly and not surprisingly around the issue of terrorism based on Islamic fundamentalism. In this respect, it is interesting to note that both countries had opposed NATO’s 1999 war against Serbia. Both countries saw the armed Kosovar resistance to Serbia as tied to international Muslim terrorism. Echoing a major Russian concern, then Foreign Minister Ariel Sharon had stated “If it becomes NATO policy to get involved militarily in internal conflicts in the world, would not Israel find itself one day under attack if the Arabs of Galilee want autonomy?” (He was referring to a small Arab majority area, north of Israel proper.) After 9/11, on September 30, 2002, during an official visit to Israel, Putin declared that “We regard Israel an important participant in the antiterrorist coalition.”

Things have changed since. Russia considers its policies towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict a crucial component of the mediating role it wants to play between the West and the Arab and Muslim world. Its relations with Israel have deteriorated, but far from completely, for a number of reasons, notably because of the formal contacts that Russia has established with Hamas since it won the Palestinian elections of January 2006. In March 2006 and 2007, Moscow welcomed official Hamas delegations. Contrary to Israel and the US, Russia refuses to regard it as a terrorist organization. The same applies to Hezbollah in Lebanon. To justify this position, Russian leaders insist that these are not uprooted and itinerant terrorist organizations. They consider them political organizations with a strong and identifiable social basis in a country to which they belong and where they participate in legitimate elections. While urging Hamas to recognize Israel as a state and stop terrorist attacks, Russian representatives say that ostracizing Hamas can only confine it to terrorism.

Among the sensible things that Putin has said about terrorism, he sometimes stated that it cannot be eradicated without addressing “the causes that feed it, like social injustice and deprivation.” The prescription is obviously more easily put on the agenda in addressing foreign affairs than internal ones.

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## **Analysis**

### **Muslim Fundamentalism in Dagestan: A Movement on the Rise**

By Paul Lies, Mannheim

#### **Abstract**

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian republic of Dagestan has faced numerous security threats. A number of ethnic groups, clans, and organized crime groups live side by side there and periodically resort to violence to pursue their interests. Violence among Islamic fundamentalist militants is also on the rise. All indications suggest that their underground movements are gaining momentum. This article addresses the central questions: Why are more people joining the ranks of these groups and why are they increasingly prone to violence?

#### **The Muslim Tradition in Dagestan**

More than 90 percent of Dagestan’s residents are members of ethnic groups that were converted to Islam in the course of their history. Islamization began in the 7<sup>th</sup> century with the conquest of the city of Derbent by

the Arab Caliphate. However, Islam did not simply replace the pre-Islamic traditions, but intermingled with them. The local conventions, traditions, and customary laws known collectively as *adat*, such as the practice of the blood feud, are still followed today.

From the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Dagestan was a center of Muslim scholarship that enjoyed a high reputation throughout the Muslim world. In parallel with scholarly Islam, however, the Muslim school of mysticism known as Sufism emerged. At the heart of Sufism lies the quest to know God directly. For this purpose, the Sufis practice special techniques, including certain forms of ascetic lifestyles or special methods of going into a trance (the so-called *dhikr*). The communities of mystics are usually described as brotherhoods or orders, and their names can be traced back to those of their founders. In Dagestan, the Kadiriya order (12<sup>th</sup> century) and the Nakshbandiya order (15<sup>th</sup> century) attracted significant followings. Especially during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, these two orders gained innumerable adherents. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the underground Shadhiliya order became popular.

The Soviet era was a crucial time for contemporary developments in Dagestani Islam. Between 1927 and 1940, the Soviets consistently tried to destroy Islam. They closed all Muslim centers of education and mosques. Those spiritual leaders who failed to flee abroad were persecuted and mostly killed. In 1941, Stalin relaxed his repressive policies towards Islam and some mosques were reopened in Dagestan. They were monitored by the intelligence services, however, and were forced to practice a form of Islam that was in line with the regime. Many Muslims remained aloof from them.

The Soviets successfully destroyed scholarly Islam. Their influence on Sufism, on the other hand, remained limited. The hermetic nature of Sufism and its independence from the institutions of scholarly Islam made it difficult to grasp for the Soviets. Its decentralized organizational structure – each order consists of dozens of groups that have few dealings with one another – and the traditional strong hierarchy and discipline of its members are useful for maintaining an effective underground organization. For the entire duration of the Soviet era, Sufi sheikhs perpetuated their secret schools of Islam in which they taught Arabic and the Koran. However, it was impossible under these conditions to engage in a profound study of the mystics' teachings. Due to this development, Dagestani Sufism has become "shallower" to some extent. In the 1990s, the Sufi sheikhs were notable not for profound teachings, but mainly for their unswerving adherence to mandatory rituals and their religious-political engagement. This specifically "post-Soviet" brand of Sufism is today the dominant variety of Islam in Dagestan.

### **The Spread of Muslim Fundamentalism in Dagestan during the 1990s**

The end of the 1980s saw the first public emergence of Muslim movements in Dagestan that, in terms of their

views on matters of faith, law, and rite, could be classified as belonging to Islamic fundamentalism. This fundamentalism is a "back to the roots" movement within Islam. Its members strive to practice Islam as it existed during the time of the Prophet Muhammad and his first four successors, the so-called "Rightly Guided Caliphs." One main goal of the movement is to establish an Islamic system of government in countries that are populated by Muslims, but have a secular (laicist) government. An "Islamic system" in this context means the alignment of the entire system of laws and standards with Sharia. The second main goal consists in overcoming the differences between the various groups and movements within Islam, since these only emerged after the times of Muhammad and the "Rightly Guided Caliphs." The only admissible sources of faith according to Islamic fundamentalists are the Koran and the *sunna* of the Prophet Muhammad, but not the writings of other Muslim authorities. All of these hallmarks are simultaneously the cause of longstanding tensions between fundamentalists and Sufism, which diverges in many areas from what might be considered "original Islam."

In Dagestan, too, Muslim fundamentalist movements have been noted mainly for their criticism of Sufism. Their moderate wing numbered around 1,400 members and coalesced around Ahmed-Kadi Akhtaev, a renowned theologian and politician. Akhtaev preached the moral and spiritual superiority of Islam and favored the idea of a Muslim North Caucasus that would be independent politically and economically from Russia. However, he rejected the notion of pursuing this goal by violent means and instead advocated engagement in the realm of politics and civil society. While he criticized Sufism, he was tolerant of its adherents. He noted repeatedly that struggles between the various schools of faith could only damage the reputation of Islam. Akhtaev was a serious challenger both to radical fundamentalists and to the representatives of the official Muslim authorities. He died in March 1998 and the circumstances of his death remain unexplained.

The spiritual and ideological head of the most influential fundamentalist group was Bagauddin Kebedov, who called himself Bagauddin Muhammad. Since the beginning of the 1990s, Kebedov had condemned Sufism in extremely harsh terms. On several occasions, he argued that mystical practices were inconsistent with the Koran and the principles of monotheism and disparaged the Sufis as polytheists. He was equally uncompromising in his attitudes towards the Dagestani government. He regarded its representatives, Muslims who adhered to the secular principle of state government, as "godless." He refused to cooperate in any way with the organs of the state.

Kebedov untiringly advanced the propagation of Muslim fundamentalist thinking. In the village of Pervomayskoye, he founded a publishing house that printed the classics of fundamentalist writings in Russian. Most of these books were produced in cooperation with Saudi endowments, and most authors were representatives of Wahhabism – the prevalent variant of Islam in Saudi Arabia. This fact, together with certain unambiguous statements by Kebedov, is evidence that the radical fundamentalist wing adhered to Wahhabi Islam. Kebedov had several thousand followers all over Dagestan.

According to the estimates of various experts, fundamentalists made up between 3 and 20 per cent of the Muslim population in Dagestan. However, according to social science studies, the number of declared opponents of fundamentalist Islam went down from 74 to 63 per cent in the period March–September 1998 alone. Fundamentalism was thus able to garner significant popularity. Its growth was primarily a reaction to the economic malaise and social disparities in the republic during the 1990s. Since the power elites were regarded as corrupt, and no help was to be expected from Moscow, Dagestani Muslims increasingly supported the idea that the Islamization of state and society would redress the existing problems. Since the official clergy was also seen as corrupt, a process of Islamization under their tutelage was not an option for parts of the Muslim population. The only remaining alternative consisted of the fundamentalist movements.

However, religious motives also played a role. Many spiritual leaders from Arab countries were active in Dagestan on behalf of fundamentalist endowments. They had had a much more rigorous training than the local clergy, a fact that did not remain unnoticed by their audience. New teachings were therefore frequently regarded as “true Islam.” It was only because “true Islam” radically rejected many traditions and customs of Dagestani Muslims that its adherents remained in the minority.

### **The Militarization of Fundamentalism**

When the fundamentalists ideologically condemned Sufism in a society that largely equated Islam with Sufism, conflicts were inevitable. The Sufis dealt ruthlessly with their opponents. The official clergy publicly designated the Wahhabis as “enemies of the Dagestani people” and announced that all measures would be taken to “cauterize the plague of Wahhabism in Dagestan with a red-hot poker” (in the words of Dagestan’s supreme Muslim leader, Mufti Said-Muhammad Abubakarov at a press conference in May 1997). Attacks on Wahhabi mosques occurred frequently. In a number of clashes and fights with Sufis, the outnumbered

Wahhabis frequently took a beating. Organized crime groups threatened them while the police discriminated against them. Against this background, the Wahhabis set up their own self-defense structures and began to train fighters of their own.

Many, mainly younger, Dagestani Wahhabis fought alongside the Chechens during the first Chechen War. They received excellent training and established ties with co-religionists from around the world. They regarded the outcome of the war in 1996 as a defeat for Russia and as evidence of the weakness of Russia’s armed forces. For Kebedov and his entourage, this was a life-changing experience: They began to believe that it was feasible, in alliance with the Wahhabis and Chechen field commanders, to overthrow the Dagestani government, which was loyal to Moscow, and to create an Islamic State according to their own ideas.

They began to put this plan into practice in the beginning of 1997. The protagonists were Saudi-born Wahhabi Ibn al-Khattab and notorious Chechen field commander Shamil Basaev. They established several training camps in Dagestan and sent their recruits to training camps in Chechnya, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. Within a few years, they had managed to build up an effective fighting force that was capable of protecting the Wahhabi communities. However, Kebedov, Khattab, and Basaev did not think this was sufficient. They aimed for a unification of Chechnya and Dagestan into a single state at the earliest possible date.

Some Wahhabi communities in Dagestan neither approved of the idea of unification with Chechnya nor of the confrontation with the government, but were unable to assert themselves. On August 2, 1999, Dagestani and Chechen fighters led by Basaev and Khattab invaded Dagestan from Chechen territory, and within days had managed to bring a substantial slice of territory under their control. At the end of August, Russian regular forces managed to throw back the rebels after fierce fighting. Subsequently, they began a military campaign against the Wahhabi settlers in Kadar, Karamakhi, and Chabanmakhi, which had declared themselves an independent Muslim territory one year earlier. On September 16, 1999, the Dagestani parliament passed the “Law on the Prohibition of Wahhabi and Other Extremist Activity on the Territory of the Republic of Dagestan.”

### **Militant Muslim Fundamentalism Today**

In the initial years after the adoption of the law that outlawed all fundamentalist groups, Wahhabi activities in Dagestan were markedly reduced. On the one hand, the outbreak of the Second Chechen War played a key role because it tied down Chechen commanders

and their followers in Chechnya. Khattab, Basaev, and several other key figures were killed in the war. The second reason is that the Dagestani security forces began a merciless hunt for militant Wahhabis. In the process, all (i.e., including moderate) adherents of fundamentalist Islam came under general suspicion. Anybody who was not arrested immediately was placed under surveillance and brought in repeatedly for interrogation. As reported by the Memorial human rights organization, suspects were beaten, tortured, raped, and forced to sign false confessions. Most of them were sentenced to years of imprisonment. Some disappeared and were never seen again.

These are the methods that have contributed to the situation today. Since 2002, former detainees have been released and have been taking revenge. Hundreds of police officers and members of the security forces have been targeted. The security forces have reacted with more violence and lawlessness and are thus creating even more discontented individuals who join militant Muslim organizations. Terrorist attacks and skirmish-

es between militant Muslims and the security forces presently occur every two or three days in Dagestan – more frequently than ever. Adherents of fundamentalist Islam have founded several underground movements. The best-known of these is called “Shariat” and cooperates with Chechen rebels. Other examples are “Saifullah” (The Sword of Allah) and “Jundullah” (The Warriors of Allah). The security forces frequently manage to arrest or assassinate the leaders of these groups; but there is no shortage of successors.

It is highly likely that the numbers of followers of the militant fundamentalist movements will continue to increase in the future. The social and economic conditions in the republic are only very slowly improving, corruption is pervasive, and the security situation has deteriorated dramatically compared to the 1990s. Fundamentalist groups continue to represent the only possible alternative for all discontented parties, especially for those who believe that all grievances can be redressed by means of Islamization.

*Translated from the German by Christopher Findlay*

#### *About the author*

Paul Lies has degrees in Political Science and Slavic Studies and currently works as a freelance journalist and editor.

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