

# FROM RACKETEER TO EMIR: A POLITICAL PORTRAIT OF DOKU UMAROV, RUSSIA'S MOST WANTED MAN

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## Abstract

*On March 29, 2010, two female suicide assailants blew themselves up at two separate locations along Moscow's underground network, killing at least 39 people. Two days later, the leader of the rebel movement in the Northern Caucasus, Doku Umarov, claimed responsibility for the attacks. For those monitoring the political situation in the Northern Caucasus, Umarov's claim of responsibility came as no surprise. Even so, few analysts have been able to shed any meaningful light on Umarov's core political beliefs. This is not surprising considering that so much of Umarov's background remains shrouded in uncertainty. The following paper represents a tentative attempt to sketch Umarov's private and political background, from his early adulthood in the early 1980s up to his portentous proclamation of the Caucasus Emirate in 2007.*

**Keywords:** Umarov, criminality, Russo-Chechen war, kidnapping, Caucasus Emirate

## Introduction: Formative experiences and accusations of criminality

Emil Souleimanov, a Chechen political scientist, perhaps put it best when he described Doku Umarov as a man with a "rather unclear past".<sup>1</sup> We know that he was born in the town of Kharsenoi in Chechnya's Shatoisky district in April 1964.<sup>2</sup> Practically nothing is known about Umarov's childhood experiences. By Umarov's own account, his family were members of Chechnya's intelligentsia.<sup>3</sup> The first substantial information relating to his formative experiences concerns his graduation from the construction faculty of the Oil Institute in Grozny, Chechnya's capital city, where he reportedly secured a degree in engineering.<sup>4</sup>

Assuming that Umarov was approximately twenty-one years of age on graduating from the Oil Institute, this would suggest that his studies were completed in either 1984 or 1985. This was a difficult time for any young Chechen graduate to make a gainful, honest living. Chechnya's economy

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<sup>1</sup> Emil Souleimanov, *An Endless War: The Russian-Chechen Conflict in Perspective (With a Preface by Anatol Lieven)*, (Peter Lang: Frankfurt am Main, 2007), 263.

<sup>2</sup> Ruslan Isayev, "Dokka Umarov: A Hawk Flies to the Ichkerian Throne", *Prague Watchdog*, June 20, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Andrei Babitsky, "Russia: RFE/RL Interviews Chechen Field Commander Umarov", *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, July 28, 2005, <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1060266.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Charles W. Blandy, "Chechnya: Continued Violence", *Conflict Studies Research Centre*, (December 2006), [www.da.mod.uk/colleges/arag/document-listings/.../06\(54\)CWB.pdf](http://www.da.mod.uk/colleges/arag/document-listings/.../06(54)CWB.pdf) (last accessed July 21, 2010).

became evermore dichotomised during the Brezhnev era. The republic's highly profitable oil industry, centred on Grozny and its surrounds, was dominated by ethnic Russians and the recruitment of Chechens and Ingush into this sector was actively discouraged.<sup>5</sup> With job opportunities scarce in the republic's most lucrative economic sector, a majority of Chechens found themselves confined to their overpopulated home villages.<sup>6</sup> The options facing this unwanted labour force were threefold: seek low-wage employment in Chechnya's agricultural sector; emigrate to another part of the USSR in search of seasonal, or permanent, work; or try to carve out a niche in Chechnya's shadow economy.

Not long after graduating, Umarov chose to emigrate and fetched up in central Russia. It is not certain whether the motivation behind this decision was economic or something altogether more untoward. According to certain sources, Umarov became involved in criminality during the early nineteen-eighties. One account holds that he was arrested in 1982 on charges of "hooliganism" and sentenced to three years imprisonment.<sup>7</sup> A second account details how Umarov was charged and convicted of "reckless homicide" in 1980, when he would have been just sixteen.<sup>8</sup> While a third account claims that he was convicted of "manslaughter" in 1981.<sup>9</sup> If we are to read anything into these accounts then Umarov must have spent a considerable amount of time in prison between the years 1980 and 1984 – in other words the approximate period during which he is supposed to have attended the Oil Institute in Grozny.

Regardless of whether he spent these years in college or in prison, Umarov certainly left Chechnya sometime in the mid-1980s. By the early 1990s he had established himself as a businessman in Siberia, in the city of Tyumen to be exact. Here, Umarov reportedly worked as the commercial director of the so-called Tyumen-Agda F4 enterprise.<sup>10</sup> Umarov secured this job by virtue of certain family connections. The managing director of the company was another Chechen, one Musa Atayev, Umarov's cousin.

Sources close to Russia's security establishment claim that Umarov's time in Tyumen was cut short by a violent episode he became embroiled in during the summer of 1992.<sup>11</sup> Following an altercation with a group of local teenagers, the exact details of which are unclear, Umarov and Atayev gained forcible entry to a house in the Patrushayevo district of Tyumen. The house belonged to a Mr. Alexander Subotin, whose son was one of the youths who had somehow aggravated the Chechen cousins. Umarov and Atayev conducted themselves belligerently and demanded of Mr. Subotin that he turn over his son immediately. When Subotin asked for an explanation as to the two intruders' interest in his son, he was shot and left for dead (Subotin survived his wounds). The Chechen duo then allegedly

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<sup>5</sup> John B. Dunlop, *Russia confronts Chechnya: roots of a separatist conflict*, (Cambridge University Press: Great Britain, 1998), 87.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 85-88.

<sup>7</sup> Nikolai Vavarin, "Doku Umarov – Nepriznanny lider ili marionetka?" [Doku Umarov – Unrecognised leader or puppet?], *Grozny-inform.ru*, September 21, 2007, <http://www.grozny-inform.ru/main.mhtml?Part=17&PubID=3054> (last accessed July 21, 2010).

<sup>8</sup> "Tretiy posle Maskhadova i Basayeva. Kto takoi Doku Umarov?" [Third after Maskhadov and Basayev. Who is Doku Umarov?], *Rian.ru*, October 31, 2007 <http://www.rian.ru/spravka/20071031/86077954.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Vadim Rechkalov, "Gelayev bylez iz peshchery i natknulsya na pogranchny naryad ..." [Gelayev climbed out of a cave and encountered a border detail ...], *Izvestiya*, March 1, 2004, <http://www.izvestia.ru/incident/article44813/>.

<sup>10</sup> Nikolai Vavarin, "Doku Umarov – Nepriznanny lider ili marionetka?"

<sup>11</sup> Vavarin's source material would seem to have originated with Russia's Interior Ministry, <http://www.mvd.ru/news/12646/>.

executed a second family member, as well as a visitor to the household, before helping themselves to some of the Subotins' belongings and making good their escape. By the time murder charges were brought against them in July 1992,<sup>12</sup> Umarov and Atayev had returned to Chechnya, which by this time had declared its independence from the Russian Federation. Chechnya thus represented a safe haven for fugitives from Russian justice such as Umarov and Atayev.

Naturally, a degree of circumspection is required when dealing with source material furnished by Russia's military-security complex. It is possible that the Subotin affair, as well as the other accusations that have been made against Umarov, are parts of an "active measure" by Russia's Federal Security Service designed to discredit him. However, even one of Umarov's intimates, the Islamic theologian Sheikh Said Buryatsky, has acknowledged that Umarov was involved in racketeering during an earlier stage of his life.<sup>13</sup>

A celebrated Islamic scholar, Buryatsky was inspired by Umarov's establishment of the Caucasus Emirate and travelled to the region in 2008 to take part in the insurgency.<sup>14</sup> Buryatsky became personally acquainted with several of the Emirate's leaders, including Umarov, and documented his experiences on rebel websites such as Kavkazcenter.com and Hunafa.com. In a series entitled "An inside view of Jihad", Buryatsky detailed the exploits of the Caucasus mujahedin in their battles against pro-Russian forces.<sup>15</sup>

Before his death at the hands of Russian security forces in March 2010, Buryatsky stated forthrightly that Umarov had been a racketeer in Moscow prior to the outbreak of the first Russo-Chechen war in 1994. "That's no secret", Buryatsky noted rather dismissively, as though this were a matter of fact long in the public domain.<sup>16</sup> Buryatsky's candid references to Umarov's background would seem to confirm suspicions that the latter was involved in organised crime prior to his return to Chechnya, probably sometime in mid-1992. "He, like everyone else, has made mistakes, from which nobody is safe, but such is their insignificance when compared to his positive qualities that I ask Allah to forgive him," wrote Buryatsky.<sup>17</sup> Whether Buryatsky is referring here to Umarov's involvement in racketeering, or something more sinister, such as the Subotin affair, we cannot be certain. It is also possible, though unlikely, that Buryatsky may be alluding to Umarov's involvement in the hostage-taking industry that flourished in Chechnya during the inter-war years, 1997–1999. This period in Umarov's career will be covered in more detail later.

It is difficult to conceive of a reason why Sheikh Buryatsky would misrepresent Umarov's past life. It should also be noted that nobody in the Emirate's leadership, least of all Umarov, has sought to refute

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<sup>12</sup> Alexander Shvarev, "Doku Umarova "nakryli" v Internetye" [Doku Umarov "covered" on the internet], *Rosbalt.ru*, March 31, 2008, <http://www.rosbalt.ru/2008/03/31/469981.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Sheikh Abu Saad, "Vzglyad na dzhikhad iznutri: po proshestii goda" [Looking for jihad within: one year on], *Hunafa.com*, May 18, 2009, <http://hunafa.com/?p=1407>.

<sup>14</sup> "Tikhomirov Alexander (Sheikh Said Abu Saad al-Buryati – Said Buryatsky)", *Kavkaz-uzel.ru*, August 27, 2009, <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/158565> (last accessed July 21, 2010).

<sup>15</sup> Kevin Daniel Leahy, "Sheikh Said Buryatsky and the Fresh Cult of the Suicide Bomber in the North Caucasus", *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, vol. 11:17, (September 16, 2009), <http://www.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/5177> (last accessed July 21, 2010).

<sup>16</sup> Abu Saad, "Vzglyad na dzhikhad iznutri: po proshestii goda".

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

Buryatsky's assertions. This, of itself, would seem to confirm the veracity of Buryatsky's reportage. Nor should it necessarily surprise one that someone with Umarov's social profile might have participated in organised crime in the early 1990s. The sociologist Georgi Derluguian has described vividly the challenges facing young Chechen males such as Umarov who emigrated to Russia in search of work during the 1980s:<sup>18</sup>

*Some village lads [...] proved ill prepared for the university and flunked out. Or they could not find the desired jobs because the construction industry and agriculture, which were the traditional Chechen occupations for previous generations, had grown highly competitive with the mass influx of newly impoverished migrant workers from republics such as the Ukraine and Moldova. Instead of sinking into penury or returning home as miserable failures, these Chechen youths found or fought their way into the dangerous but fabulously lucrative and romanticized arena of violent entrepreneurship. The traditions of clan solidarity, Chechen masculinity, and ritualized violence surely played a big role in enabling them to do this, providing a ready set of skills that were advantageous in the criminal underworld.*<sup>19</sup>

In these labour market conditions, Umarov's engineering degree would have counted for little. Racketeering in Tyumen, and later in Moscow, may have seemed the only option available to him. Possibly he could have eschewed the criminal lifestyle and returned to Chechnya, but the tradition of "Chechen masculinity", referred to by Derluguian above, would have militated against his choosing such a course of action. As Emil Souleimanov explains:<sup>20</sup>

*Since the Chechens have almost never in their history struggled with a priori fixed statutes, nor with class or economy-based social hierarchies, a constant battle for prestige and a higher position in the flexible social scale has been underway within their society. At the same time, the primary stimulator and indicator of the struggle for a higher position in this informal social hierarchy has been the community; that is, public opinion – how one is "viewed in the eyes of the people".*

Had he returned to Chechnya penniless, having failed to procure gainful employment in the Russian heartland, Umarov would have been painfully self-conscious of his own status as a "failure" in the eyes of many of his contemporaries. Quite possibly, it was this consideration that led him to go into business with Musa Atayev in Tyumen.

This fear of failure may also have contributed to the career paths of other young Chechens seeking to make a living in Russian cities during this period. Shamil Basayev, later to be Umarov's vice-president, was resident in Moscow during the late-1980s and early-1990s.<sup>21</sup> Basayev had initially arrived in the Russian capital in pursuit of a third-level education but finished up dabbling in the black market, trading in foreign computers.<sup>22</sup> Ruslan Gelayev, an important influence in the early portion of

<sup>18</sup> Georgi Derluguian, *Bourdieu's Secret Admirer in the Caucasus: A World-System Biography*, (University of Chicago Press: Chicago & London, 2005), 246-247.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 246-247.

<sup>20</sup> Souleimanov, "An Endless War", p. 31.

<sup>21</sup> "Biografiya Shamilya Basayeva: Poklonnik Ruzvelta i Che Gevary" [A biography of Shamil Basayev: Admirer of Roosevelt and Che Guevara], *Temadnya.ru*, September 29, 2004, <http://www.temadnya.ru/spravka/29sep2004/4345.html>.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

Umarov's political-military career (as will be explained below), left Chechnya as an uneducated young man in the late 1970s before reportedly taking up residence in Omsk Oblast, Siberia. Contemporaries remember Gelayev as an "odd-jobber" who married a local Russian woman.<sup>23</sup> It has also been reported that Gelayev spent time in prison during this part of his life.<sup>24</sup>

The preponderance of young Chechens, as well as migrants from other parts of the Caucasus, presented a recruitment bonanza for Russia's organised crime networks during these years. Indeed, according to the late Paul Klebnikov, an American journalist who specialised in reporting on organised crime in Russia, criminals of Chechen nationality were at the forefront of the racketeering industry in Moscow from the late 1980s onwards.<sup>25</sup>

### Participation in the First Russo-Chechen Conflict

While Umarov was to some extent a party to this broad sociological trend, he was but a footnote in the annals of Chechen organised crime during this period and had seemingly yet to amass any great wealth by the time he returned to his homeland. Buryatsky, who makes no direct references to the Subotin affair, tells us how on returning to Chechnya, Umarov went directly to his relative, Ruslan Gelayev, an influential Chechen paramilitary leader. For many years, certain in the knowledge that Umarov fought under Gelayev's command during the first Russo-Chechen war, observers believed that Umarov was absorbed seamlessly into Gelayev's paramilitary structures shortly after his return to Chechnya. Recent evidence suggests that this was not the case. Again, it is Sheikh Said Buryatsky who casts fresh light on the embryonic relationship between Gelayev and Umarov. Buryatsky quotes directly from a conversation he had with Umarov, wherein the latter related the following sequence of events:<sup>26</sup>

*When war began I arrived in Chechnya after heeding Dudayev's call [Djokhar Dudayev, the first president of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria]. Khamzat Gelayev was my distant relative and so I immediately went to him. I arrived in a Mercedes, wearing shoes, with a cigarette in my mouth and offered my assistance, to participate in the Jihad with him. Gelayev looked at me and asked did I perform namaz [ritual prayer]? I answered that I did not, but that if I must do I would learn. He did not immediately want to take me on himself and directed me to another Emir. But he later made inquiries about me and drafted me into his force.*

Firstly, it should be pointed out that Umarov did not return to Chechnya "when war began". As we have established, Umarov returned to his homeland in the summer of 1992, almost two and a half years prior to the commencement of military hostilities between Dudayev's regime in Chechnya and the Russian state. Regardless of the correct chronology involved, it seems credible that Umarov would have presented himself to Gelayev as described by Buryatsky. This meeting may not have taken place until 1993, however, at which time Gelayev had returned to Chechnya from Abkhazia.<sup>27</sup> The two men

<sup>23</sup> "Zhena Gelayeva zhyvet v Sibirskoy derevne na 800 rubley v mesyats" [Gelayev's wife lives in a Siberian village on 800 rubles a month], *Ntv.ru*, October 20, 2003, <http://www.ntv.ru/novosti/30786/>.

<sup>24</sup> Dmitri Ivanov, "Ruslan Gelayev i dva boytsa" [Ruslan Gelayev and two soldiers], *Lenta.ru*, March 1, 2004 <http://lenta.ru/articles/2004/03/01/gelayev/>.

<sup>25</sup> Paul Klebnikov, *Godfather of the Kremlin: Boris Berezovsky and the looting of Russia*, (Harcourt Inc.: USA, 2000), 13-14.

<sup>26</sup> Abu Saad, "Vzglyad na dzhikhad iznutri: po proshestii goda".

<sup>27</sup> The conflict in Abkhazia ended in mid-1993: Ivanov, "Ruslan Gelayev i dva boytsa".

were related and it would have made sense for Umarov to waylay relatives in search of employment, just as he had done with Musa Atayev in Tyumen.<sup>28</sup>

By mid-1992, Ruslan Gelayev was allied with Chechnya's nationalist leader, Dzhokhar Dudayev, a former General in the Soviet airforce. Following his election as president, Dudayev proceeded to declare Chechnya's independence from the Russian Federation. This decision ushered in a period of Cold War between Grozny and Moscow which lasted until December 1994 when Russian tanks finally moved into the rebellious republic as part of an attempt to "restore constitutional order".<sup>29</sup>

Men like Gelayev, as well as the aforementioned Shamil Basayev, functioned as the military backbone of the Dudayev regime. Abetted by Russia's military and intelligence services, Gelayev and Basayev had fought against Georgian nationalist forces in Abkhazia in 1992–93.<sup>30</sup> Basayev had come a long way from the aspiring student who spent the latter half of the 1980s peddling foreign computers and flirting with the world of organised crime. It was in Abkhazia, that he discovered a talent for war-making, as well as a certain flair for cruelty that would continue to manifest itself throughout his long career. Gelayev also found his niche in Abkhazia. In addition to honing his military talents, some reports suggest that Gelayev's involvement in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict was notable for the cruelty he showed towards captured Georgian soldiers.<sup>31</sup> Similar reports abound in relation to Basayev's treatment of Georgian prisoners of war.<sup>32</sup>

Their exploits in Abkhazia bestowed a certain prestige on these two men. On returning to Chechnya they were feted as war heroes; Basayev's "Abkhaz Battalion", in particular, caught the public's imagination.<sup>33</sup> Both Basayev and Gelayev positioned themselves as supporters of Dudayev and his nationalist agenda, although neither seemed to feel any great personal enthusiasm for the General. It was against this political backdrop that Doku Umarov appeared on Gelayev's doorstep seeking his relative's patronage.

One can readily speculate as to why Gelayev might have snubbed his plaintive kinsman so perfunctorily. For one thing, Gelayev had just returned from a particularly exacting, not to mention austere, period of existence on the battlefields of Abkhazia and may have taken umbrage at Umarov arriving at his home looking like a dilettante. Gelayev was also (re)discovering his Islamic faith at this stage of his life and would not have been impressed by Umarov's candid admission that he did not know how to perform certain basic religious rites.

The poor first impression he made on Gelayev was not to the detriment of Umarov's career in the long-term. The commander Umarov was directed to by Gelayev was Daud Akhmadov, an important

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<sup>28</sup> Mark Galeotti, "'Brotherhoods' and 'Associates': Chechen Networks of Crime and Resistance", *Low Intensity Conflict and Law Enforcement*, vol. 11:2 & 3 (Winter 2002), 342.

<sup>29</sup> John Russell, *Chechnya – Russia's 'War on Terror'*, (Routledge: London, 2007), 43.

<sup>30</sup> Derluguian, "Bourdieu's Secret Admirer in the Caucasus", p. 269.

<sup>31</sup> Ivanov, "Ruslan Gelayev i dva boytsa".

<sup>32</sup> Yuri Zarakhovich, "Why Putin Can't Claim Victory in His War on Terror", *Time*, July 10, 2006, <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1212052,00.html>.

<sup>33</sup> Thomas Goltz, *Chechnya diary: a war correspondents story of surviving the war in Chechnya*, (Thomas Dunne Books/St. Martin's Press: USA, 2003), 54.

figure within President Dudayev's notoriously corrupt inner circle.<sup>34</sup> Akhmadov seems to have been the natural point of contact between Dudayev and Gelayev for he had the distinction of being on good terms with both men. This responsibility was more challenging than it might have seemed at first glance, for Gelayev and Dudayev were never on the greatest of terms. Indeed, in March 1994, scarcely eight months before the commencement of hostilities with Russia, Gelayev and Basayev were allegedly contemplating a coup d'état to unseat Dudayev.<sup>35</sup>

As a member of Akhmadov's network Umarov's reputation began to flourish. By way of cementing his relationship with his new patron, Umarov married Akhmadov's daughter.<sup>36</sup> His career prospered under wartime conditions and at some point during the hostilities he was drafted into Gelayev's paramilitary outfit. As a member of Gelayev's "Borz" battalion, Umarov would likely have participated in the defence of Bamut, a village in south-western Chechnya. Bamut became a symbol of resistance for the Chechen rebels and Gelayev would later be decorated with the "Order of Ichkeria" for his participation in these events.<sup>37</sup> Many of the villagers hailed from the same clan as Umarov, the *Mulkoi*,<sup>38</sup> and these bonds, as well as his membership of the Borz battalion, mean that it is likely that he participated in the defence of Bamut.

## Post-War Responsibilities

Umarov emerged from the war in a position of some political influence, with a military rank of "Brigadier-General",<sup>39</sup> as well as two prestigious commendations for bravery in combat.<sup>40</sup> In August 1996, the so-called Khasavyurt accords were signed between Russian and Chechen representatives giving Chechnya the status of a de facto independent state.<sup>41</sup> In January 1997 presidential elections were held and Aslan Maskhadov, a well-known wartime field-commander, was returned as president, replacing Dudayev who had been killed during the war.<sup>42</sup>

Sources indicate that Umarov left Gelayev's unit sometime between September 1996 and January 1997. It is unclear whether this decision was prompted by a falling out between the two men.<sup>43</sup> Regardless, Umarov sought out and received the patronage of another paramilitary leader, Akhmed

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<sup>34</sup> "Novym presidentom tak nazyvaemoy respubliki Ichkeriya ofitsial'no stal Doku Umarov" [Doku Umarov officially becomes the new president of the so-called Republic of Ichkeria], *Newsru.com*, June 21, 2006, <http://www.newsru.com/russia/21jun2006/presi.html>.

<sup>35</sup> John B. Dunlop, 'Russia confronts Chechnya', p. 152.

<sup>36</sup> "Tretiy posle Maskhadova ee Basayeva. Kto takoi Doku Umarov", *Rian.ru*, October 31, 2007 <http://www.rian.ru/spravka/20071031/86077954.html>.

<sup>37</sup> Ivanov, "Ruslan Gelayev i dva boytsa".

<sup>38</sup> Sebastian Smith, *Allah's Mountains: The Battle for Chechnya*, (Tauris Parke Paperbacks: London, 2006), 193.

<sup>39</sup> Timur Aliev, "New Chechen Leader To Push Nationalist Agenda", *Institute of War and Peace Reporting*, no. 345, June 23, 2006.

<sup>40</sup> Liz Fuller, "Chechnya: A Look At Slain Leader's Legacy And Successor", *RFE/RL*, June 21, 2006, <http://www.rferl.org/content/Article/1069356.html>.

<sup>41</sup> Gall & de Waal, "A Small Victorious War", pp. 359-360.

<sup>42</sup> Tony Wood, *Chechnya: The Case for Independence*, (Verso: London/ New York, 2007), 81.

<sup>43</sup> Charles W. Blandy, "Chechnya: Continued Violence", *Conflict Studies Research Centre*, (December 2006), [www.da.mod.uk/colleges/arag/document-listings/.../06\(54\)CWB.pdf](http://www.da.mod.uk/colleges/arag/document-listings/.../06(54)CWB.pdf).

Zakayev.<sup>44</sup> It may well have been Zakayev who recommended Umarov to Maskhadov as a candidate for the chairmanship of Chechnya's new Security Council. Maskhadov duly confirmed Umarov's growing political influence by appointing him to this post in June 1997.<sup>45</sup>

Perhaps the most serious challenge facing Umarov in his new capacity as secretary of Chechnya's Security Council was the increased political and social instability engendered by the increasingly widespread practice of hostage-taking within the new state. In June 2008, Umarov explained the situation he found himself in as follows<sup>46</sup>:

*[...] we know that after the first war there was no unity among the Mujahideen like in the old days, and [that] the Mujahideen were organizing into groups. Since I had my group under my command, and since I had a military training base, it was impossible to remain outside politics back at that time, so even if you wanted to remain outside politics, they wouldn't let you do that, and the President of that time, Aslan Maskhadov, may Allah have mercy on him, appointed me Secretary of Security.*

Paramilitary groups independent of government authority now emerged, as Umarov would later put it, "like mushrooms after rain".<sup>47</sup> In hindsight, the calculations behind Maskhadov's appointment are easy to discern: Umarov was known to be on good terms with many of the major players in Chechnya's hostage-taking industry, among them Arbi Barayev, Balaudi Tekilov and the Akhmadov brothers. Barayev, a field-commander of some renown during the first Russo-Chechen conflict, hailed from the same clan and geographical location as Umarov.<sup>48</sup> It has since been claimed that Umarov used his new role as secretary of the Security Council as cover for entering into a freelance hostage-taking enterprise with Barayev, but this speculation has never been confirmed.<sup>49</sup>

Umarov was also on good terms with Baludi Tekilov, an opportunistic former racketeer and pimp who emerged as one of the main point-men in Chechnya's hostage-taking industry during the late 1990s.<sup>50</sup> Like Umarov, Tekilov returned to Chechnya in the early 1990s as a fugitive from Russian justice; he too sought to advance his political career through courtship, eventually marrying the sister of Salman Raduyev, a famous Chechen field-commander.<sup>51</sup> Raduyev's resourceful new brother-in-law quickly

<sup>44</sup> Liz Fuller, "Chechnya: A Look At Slain Leader's Legacy And Successor", *RFE/RL*, June 21, 2006, <http://www.rferl.org/content/Article/1069356.html>.

<sup>45</sup> "Tretiy posle Maskhadova i Basayeva. Kto takoi Doku Umarov".

<sup>46</sup> "Dokka Umarov: 'A great deal of purification of the ranks of the Mujahideen is going on'", *Kavkazcenter.com*, June 15, 2008, <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/eng/content/2008/06/15/9814.shtml>.

<sup>47</sup> 'Interview with Dokka Umarov', *Kavkazcenter.com*, March 8, 2007, <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/eng/content/2007/03/08/7655.shtml>.

<sup>48</sup> Ruslan Isayev, "Dokka Umarov: A Hawk Flies to the Ichkerian Throne", *Prague Watchdog*, June 20, 2006, <http://www.watchdog.cz/?show=000000-000004-000001-000188&lang=1>.

<sup>49</sup> Laurent Vinatier, "Nord-Caucase: les guerres inachevées" [The North Caucasus : the unfinished wars], *Institut Thomas More*, (April 12, 2010).

<sup>50</sup> Vyacheslav Izmailov, "V podpol'noy Ichkerii smenilos' podpol'noe rukovodstvo" [In underground Ichkeria there are changes in the underground leadership], *Novaya Gazeta*, no. 46, July 22, 2006, <http://2006.novayagazeta.ru/nomer/2006/46n/n46n-s21.shtml>; see also "Berezovskovo posadyat za tsementnyi zavod" [Berezovsky will be planted in the cement works], *Gazeta.ru*, January 25, 2002, <http://www.gazeta.ru/2002/01/25/berezovskogo.shtml>.

<sup>51</sup> Alexander Shvarev, "Pechatnyy stanok terroristov" [Terrorists' printing press], *Vremya Novosti*, no. 229, December 16, 2004, <http://www.vremya.ru/print/114638.html>.



caught his eye and he soon appointed Tekilov as his chief-of-staff. Tekilov used this influential position to carve out a niche for himself in Chechnya's thriving hostage-taking industry.<sup>52</sup> Under Chechnya's post-war government, Tekilov was appointed head of the so-called Commission for the Liberation of Missing or Detained Persons.<sup>53</sup>

Umarov has since claimed that it was his necessary association with the likes of Barayev, Tekilov and Akhmadov that led to him being accused of participation in the hostage-taking trade. In an interview with Andrei Babitsky in 2005, Umarov flatly denied any involvement in such activities:<sup>54</sup>

*Because of these contacts, I began to be accused of this [hostage-taking]. But I always – when these accusations reached this level, when Maskhadov said at the Security Council that I had been accused – I said, "Here is my statement, but a person's guilt can only be established in court. If I am guilty, I will not lift a finger to defend myself. Prove it and that's all. But what people say – that is slander, and it isn't for me. Just give me a fact. Without facts, a person can say, looking at a horse, "there is a goat".*

Umarov is correct in stating that there is no concrete evidence of his direct involvement in the hostage-taking industry. However, in 2007, Umarov did little to enhance the case for his defence by posthumously honouring Barayev, a well-known hostage-taker, promoting him to the rank of "Brigadier-General".<sup>55</sup> Indeed, this decision was especially strange given Barayev's known collaboration with Russia's intelligence agencies.<sup>56</sup> Barayev had been stripped of this rank by President Maskhadov in July 1998 following a violent altercation in Gudermes, Chechnya's second largest city.<sup>57</sup>

It is difficult to ascertain the extent to which Umarov was involved in Chechnya's inter-war hostage-taking business.<sup>58</sup> It can be said with certainty, however, that from the end of the first war, Umarov was consorting openly with several known participants in the hostage trade. Barayev, for example, is described by Souleimanov as "the nation's most notorious ruffian and kidnapper".<sup>59</sup> The Akhmadov brothers, meanwhile, were an influential presence in the Urus-Martan District of Chechnya during the inter-war years<sup>60</sup> and must have been known to Umarov.

<sup>52</sup> Izmailov, "V podpol'noy Ichkerii smenilos' podpol'noe rukovodstvo".

<sup>53</sup> Alexander Shvarev, "Pechatnyy stanok terroristov".

<sup>54</sup> Andrei Babitsky, "Russia: RFE/RL Interviews Chechen Field Commander Umarov".

<sup>55</sup> Mairbek Vatchagaev, "Political and Militant Leadership Changes in Dagestan", *Chechnya Weekly*, volume 8, issue 40, October 18, 2007,

[http://www.jamestown.org/programs/ncw/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=4490&tx\\_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=189&no\\_cache=1](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/ncw/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=4490&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=189&no_cache=1).

<sup>56</sup> Sanobar Shermatova, "Moscow Tragedy: More Questions Than Answers", *Caucasus Reporting Service: Institute for War and Peace Reporting*, no. 153, February 21, 2005, <http://www.iwpr.net/report-news/moscow-tragedy-more-questions-answers>.

<sup>57</sup> Vakhit Akaev, "Religious-political Conflict in the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria", *Central Asia and The Caucasus*, <http://www.ca-c.org/dataeng/05.akaev.shtml>.

<sup>58</sup> This has not prevented certain observers – in some cases even parties who are generally well disposed toward the rebel movement – from forthrightly accusing Umarov of complicity in the hostage trade: Alexander Litvinenko & Yuri Felshtinsky, *Blowing up Russia, The Secret Plot to Bring Back KGB Terror*, (Gibson Square: Great Britain, 2007), 90.

<sup>59</sup> Souleimanov, "An Endless War", p. 129.

<sup>60</sup> Anna Politkovskaya (with an introduction by Thomas de Waal), *A Dirty War: A Russian Reporter in Chechnya*, (Butler & Tanner Ltd.: Great Britain, 2001), xxiv.

Umarov's association with such individuals does not, of course, prove his direct involvement in the hostage-taking industry. It should be noted, however, that one need not have personally kicked down doors and hauled innocent people off into captivity to have been an active participant in the hostage trade. Referencing a conversation he had with Alexander Mukomolov, a member of General Alexander Lebed's "peacemaking mission" to Chechnya, Valeri Tishkov, a leading Russian ethnologist, has explained how kidnappings were usually the work not of individuals but rather of loosely formed groups of field-commanders who would haggle with one another over their share of the ransom, sometimes even trading hostages with one another.<sup>61</sup> As secretary of the Security Council, therefore, Umarov need not have involved himself directly in the act of abducting ordinary Chechens, ethnic Russians, foreigners, journalists and other targets. Instead, he could have used this office as a means of offering protection and legal validation to associates who were involved precisely in these activities. Incidentally, these were the very grounds on which Maskhadov relieved Umarov of his official duties in mid-1998.<sup>62</sup>

While the hostage-taking phenomenon represented the most immediate challenge to Umarov in his capacity as Security Council secretary, the refusal of so many field-commanders to recognize Maskhadov's lawful authority was another trend that demanded his attention. Many of these dissidents were war-heroes who had distinguished themselves during the conflict with the Russians. Most of them were receptive to the ideology of radical Islam and took a dim view of President Maskhadov's policies, above all his efforts to establish a normative relationship with Moscow. Well-known field-commanders like Basayev, Raduyev and Barayev openly presented themselves as paragons of Islamic virtue.

Barayev renamed his paramilitary unit the "Special Purpose Islamic Brigade". Regarded throughout Chechnya as a "Wahhabi", the colloquial designation for a follower of radical Islam, Barayev was collaborating closely with like-minded field-commanders such as Abdul-Malik Mezhidov, head of the so-called Sharia Guard movement.<sup>63</sup> He was also known to enjoy the patronage of Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev, a leading figure among the radicals.<sup>64</sup> In July 1998, paramilitary forces belonging to Barayev and Mezhidov clashed in Gudermes with forces loyal to the Yamadayev family, the de facto custodians of the city. In his capacity as Security Council Chairman, Umarov was obliged to intercede in this conflict. Umarov would later describe his role in these events as that of a "referee", explaining that he had felt little enthusiasm for his official duties as Security Council chief.<sup>65</sup> After a two-day-long melee that claimed scores of lives, Barayev and Mezhidov were forced to abandon their positions in Gudermes. Maskhadov announced that both Barayev's and Mezhidov's forces were to be disbanded and forbade members of these bodies from bearing arms.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Valery Tishkov, *Chechnya: life in a war-torn society*, (University of California Press: USA), 2004, p. 111.

<sup>62</sup> Isayev, "Dokka Umarov: A Hawk Flies To The Ichkerian Throne".

<sup>63</sup> Miriam Lansky, *Chechnya's Internal Fragmentation, 1996-1999*, Fletcher Forum of World Affairs, vol. 27:2, Summer/Fall (2003): 194.

<sup>64</sup> Tishkov, "Chechnya: Life in a war-torn society", p. 121.

<sup>65</sup> "Dokka Umarov: 'A great deal of purification of the ranks of the Mujahideen is going on'", June 15, 2008, *Kavkazcenter.com*, <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/eng/content/2008/06/15/9814.shtml>.

<sup>66</sup> Miriam Lansky, "Chechnya's Internal Fragmentation, 1996-1999", p. 194.

This was a particularly difficult period for Maskhadov and his supporters. The events in Gudermes represented merely the latest in an increasingly long line of violent clashes between Wahhabi forces and government militiamen. Against this backdrop, and in the light of Umarov's close relationship with Barayev and other known Wahhabis, Maskhadov might have deemed it politically prudent to dismiss his Security Council secretary. Apart from his compromising ties to Barayev, in any case Umarov had failed to stabilise the security situation throughout Chechnya during his tenure as Security Council chief. Therefore, while we cannot satisfactorily answer the question of whether Umarov abetted the worsening security situation by partaking in Chechnya's lucrative hostage-taking industry, we can conclude that he failed to fulfil his official mandate of providing a favourable security environment in the new state.

### **Toward A Renewed Russo-Chechen Conflict**

Scant information is available about Umarov's activities between mid-1998 and September 1999, when a fresh bout of military hostilities broke out between the Russian state and the regime in Grozny. This renewal of hostilities was precipitated by an ill-advised military adventure undertaken by Maskhadov's opponents in the radical Islamic camp. In August 1999, Shamil Basayev, in tandem with a well-known Arab Islamist, Khattab, led a large party of guerrillas across Chechnya's eastern border, occupying several villages in neighbouring Dagestan.<sup>67</sup> This localised occupation of Dagestani territory was received with hostility by many Dagestanis and militia groups were hurriedly assembled to assist federal forces in repelling the invaders from Chechnya.<sup>68</sup> Although Buryatsky has claimed that Umarov took part in diversionary operations in Dagestan's Novolaksk District to cover Basayev's eventual retreat from the occupied villages, Umarov himself has made no mention of his participation in these events, nor have any other independent commentators.<sup>69</sup>

If ordinary Russians were shaken by Basayev's operation in western Dagestan, they were outraged by a series of apartment house bombings in Russian cities during September 1999, which claimed the lives of over 200 people.<sup>70</sup> Russia's security agencies were quick to uncover a "Chechen trail" behind these attacks, with the country's new Prime Minister, Vladimir Putin, promising instant results against the perpetrators.<sup>71</sup> A new war between the Russian state and Chechnya now seemed inevitable. Maskhadov vainly attempted to establish a dialogue with his counterparts in Moscow, but Basayev's adventurism in Dagestan had made him appear weak, a president who was incapable of exercising control over those nominally under his remit.

The Russian administration showed no interest in negotiating with Maskhadov. With war now seemingly inevitable, the majority of Chechnya's disparate field-commanders resolved to put their many differences to one side in order to participate in counter-measures against the coming Russian

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<sup>67</sup> Emil Souleimanov, "Chechnya, Wahhabism and the Invasion of Dagestan", *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, vol. 9, no. 4 (December 2005): 62-65.

<sup>68</sup> Souleimanov, "An Endless War", p. 148.

<sup>69</sup> Abu Saad, "Vzglyad na dzhikhad iznutri: po proshestii goda"; Certain pro-Russian sources have also reported Umarov's involvement in the Dagestan campaign: Nikolai Vavarin, "Doku Umarov – Nepriznanny lider ili marionetka?"

<sup>70</sup> Robert Bruce Ware, "Revisiting Russia's Apartment Block Blasts", *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 18:4, (2005): 599.

<sup>71</sup> Mathew Evangelista, *The Chechen Wars: will Russia go the way of the Soviet Union?*, (R.R. Donnelley & Sons: USA, 2002), 67.

invasion. In preparing for the Russian attack, Umarov resumed his collaboration with his kinsman, Ruslan Gelayev, aiding in the preparation of siege defenses in and around Grozny.<sup>72</sup> Although they still showed a willingness to collaborate on occasion, relations between Umarov and Gelayev were at best equivocal and would remain so until the latter's death in 2004.<sup>73</sup> Gelayev had prospered politically in the inter-war period, receiving the posts of prime minister and later defense minister in Maskhadov's government. He also began to show a keen interest in Islam, garnishing his credentials in this field by performing the Hajj and by attending the World Muslim Congress in Pakistan in early 1998.<sup>74</sup>

The Chechen defenders held their positions in Grozny until January 2000, when they were finally forced to begin an evacuation of the city. During their chaotic flight from Grozny that winter, the rebels sustained heavy casualties. Basayev's detachment blundered into a minefield, with Basayev himself stepping on a mine and losing a foot.<sup>75</sup> Gelayev withdrew amid controversial circumstances, with Maskhadov angrily denouncing him for abandoning his positions in Grozny without explicit orders.<sup>76</sup> Umarov retreated also, sustaining a serious head injury in the process (a bullet wound to the jaw-bone).<sup>77</sup>

It is unclear whether or not Umarov was in the company of Gelayev during this retreat but the subsequent fate of Gelayev's outfit would suggest that he was not. At the height of his controversial departure from Grozny, Gelayev was reportedly contacted by Barayev who promised him and his men safe passage out of the conflict zone.<sup>78</sup> However, as Gelayev approached the meeting place he had prearranged with Barayev, his party came under attack by Russian forces. Gelayev repaired to Komsomolskoye, his native village, where he and his men clashed with Russian forces. This engagement resulted in the deaths of hundreds of his fighters.<sup>79</sup> Although Gelayev managed to escape from this siege with his life, he was reportedly outraged by Barayev's conduct, accusing him of treachery and reportedly declaring a vendetta against him.<sup>80</sup> It is unlikely that Umarov would have used his offices to posthumously honour Barayev (as he did in 2007) had he been numbered personally among Gelayev's beleaguered party in Komsomolskoye.

It seems more probable, indeed, that Umarov was already sequestered in a safe house elsewhere in Chechnya by the time the operation in Komsomolskoye was underway. The injury he incurred during the flight from Grozny gave rise to one of the most controversial episodes in Umarov's career. One source claims that the extent of this injury led Umarov to make contact with Russia's security services. Vyacheslav Izmailov has claimed that in return for specialist treatment at a medical facility in southern Russia, Umarov provided information that led to the capture of Salautdin Temirbulatov, a particularly

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<sup>72</sup> Andrew McGregor, "Dokka Umarov: the next in line", *Chechnya Weekly*, volume 7, issue 1, December 31, 2006, [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no\\_cache=1&tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=3114](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=3114).

<sup>73</sup> Alexander, Shvarev "Spetssluzhby spasli Gelayeva" [Special Services saved Gelayev], *Vremya Novosti*, no. 33, February 28, 2005, <http://www.vremya.ru/2005/33/51/119510.html>.

<sup>74</sup> Tishkov, "Chechnya: Life in a War-Torn Society", p. 182.

<sup>75</sup> Khassan Baiev & Ruth Daniloff, *The Oath: A Surgeon Under Fire*, (Simon & Schuster: Great Britain, 2004), 285.

<sup>76</sup> Cerwyn Moore, "The Tale of Ruslan Gelayev: Understanding the International Dimensions of the Chechen Wars", *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, May 28, 2008, <http://www.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/4868>.

<sup>77</sup> Izmailov, "V podpol'noy Ichkerii smenilos' podpol'noe rukovodstvo".

<sup>78</sup> Ivanov, "Ruslan Gelayev i dva boytsa".

<sup>79</sup> "Chechen rebels besieged", *BBC News*, March 6, 2000, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/667984.stm>.

<sup>80</sup> Shermatova, "Russian anti-terrorist operation".

savage field-commander with a penchant for videotaping the executions of captured Russian soldiers.<sup>81</sup> Umarov is also said to have furnished information as to the final resting place of Gennady Shpigun, a General in Russia's interior ministry abducted from Grozny airport in March 1999.<sup>82</sup>

Umarov's reported willingness to surrender Temirbulatov to the Russians is one of the first examples of his political ruthlessness, in particular his readiness to break with former comrades in the interests of political expediency. It is certain that Temirbulatov and Umarov were known to one another for they moved in the same circles, at least during the mid-nineties. Like Umarov, Temirbulatov was a protégé of Daud Akhmadov.<sup>83</sup> He was also on terms with Gelayev<sup>84</sup> and is said to have commanded a group of up to 200 men based in Urus-Martan.<sup>85</sup> In March 2000, approximately one month after Umarov supposedly made contact with Russian security forces, Temirbulatov was arrested by Russian security forces in the village of Duba-Yurt.<sup>86</sup> Russian prosecutors, who had been investigating Temirbulatov's activities since 1996, quickly filed charges of kidnapping and terrorism against him. It should be noted that the remains of General Shpigun were also discovered that March.<sup>87</sup> The chronological proximity between these two developments and Umarov's reported contact with Russian intelligence agencies lends credence to Izmailov's account.

Izmailov claims that Umarov made contact with Russia's security agencies through "intermediaries". If so, then Umarov would have had a choice of human conduits through which to get a message through to this quarter. Barayev, Tekilov and the Akhmadov family all had well-documented links with Russia's special services. In May 2000, for example, an officer in Russia's military intelligence division (GRU) leaked information to a journalist detailing Barayev's relationship with Russia's domestic intelligence service (FSB).<sup>88</sup> Even after the renewed outbreak of hostilities between Grozny and Moscow in 1999, Barayev continued to reside in his home village, quite unmolested by Russian forces. If Umarov had no pre-existing channels of communication with Russia's security agencies at this time, then he might easily have used any of these parties as a go-between.

According to Izmailov, Russia's special services were on the verge of renegeing on the agreement and arresting Umarov, when the latter was somehow made aware of their intentions and fled to Georgia.<sup>89</sup> Umarov sought further medical treatment in Georgia and spent a period of convalescence alongside another recuperating Chechen partisan – Akhmed Zakayev.<sup>90</sup> Zakayev had also been injured during the

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<sup>81</sup> Izmailov, "V podpol'noy Ichkerii smenilos' podpol'noe rukovodstvo".

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Vladimir Yanchenko, "Traktorist' seyal smert'" ["Traktorist" sows death], *Trud*, no. 53, March 23, 2000, [http://www.trud.ru/article/23-03-2000/3700\\_traktorist\\_sejal\\_smert.html](http://www.trud.ru/article/23-03-2000/3700_traktorist_sejal_smert.html).

<sup>84</sup> Temirbulatov was reportedly in Komsomolskoye with Gelayev in March 2000: Lyudmila Karamysheva, "Vysokoe nebo" [Sky high], *Trud*, no. 239, December 27, 2001, [http://www.trud.ru/article/27-12-2001/34742\\_vysokoe\\_nebo.html](http://www.trud.ru/article/27-12-2001/34742_vysokoe_nebo.html).

<sup>85</sup> Sergei Dupin, "Mekhanizator shirokovo profilya" [Machine operator with a wide profile], *Reuters*, March 21, 2000, <http://www.memo.ru/hr/hotpoints/n-caucas/ch99/000321/k0321c.htm>.

<sup>86</sup> Yuri Akbashev, "Chechen Commander in War Crimes Trial", *Caucasus Reporting Service: Institute for War and Peace Reporting*, no. 66, January 19, 2001, [http://www.iwpr.net/?apc\\_state=hruicrs2001&l=en&s=f&o=161950](http://www.iwpr.net/?apc_state=hruicrs2001&l=en&s=f&o=161950).

<sup>87</sup> Michael Wines, "Russia Says Remains Are Those Of Envoy Abducted in Chechnya", *New York Times*, June 15, 2000, <http://www.nytimes.com/2000/06/15/world/russia-says-remains-are-those-of-envoy-abducted-in-chechnya.html>.

<sup>88</sup> Vyacheslav Izmailov, "The Drama Behind Nord-Ost", *Perspective*, vol. 8:2, November-December 2002, <http://www.bu.edu/iscip/vol13/Izmailov.html>.

<sup>89</sup> Izmailov, "V podpol'noy Ichkerii smenilos' podpol'noe rukovodstvo".

<sup>90</sup> Liz Fuller, "Chechnya: A Look At Slain Leader's Legacy And Successor".

rebels' retreat from Grozny. As mentioned previously, Umarov and Zakayev were old acquaintances. Zakayev, too, had served under Gelayev during the first war before branching out on his own and establishing his own command.<sup>91</sup> Umarov reportedly joined Zakayev's unit for a period after parting ways with Gelayev in 1996.<sup>92</sup> The nature of the relationship that evolved between Umarov and Zakayev was such that when Umarov renounced the goal of an independent Chechnya in 2007, announcing the establishment of a Caucasus Emirate in its stead, Zakayev at first could not believe that his former friend and ally might be responsible for such an act.

Soon after his period of convalescence was completed, Umarov is believed to have made his way to the Pankisi Gorge, a mountainous part of eastern Georgia that borders Chechnya.<sup>93</sup> This region plays host to a sizable community of ethnic Chechens, known as Kists, and was chosen by several Chechen rebel leaders as an ideal location for recovery and reorganisation following the devastating events of early 2000. Large numbers of refugees from Chechnya also began to arrive in the region during this period. The infiltration of Chechen paramilitary groups into Pankisi continued over a period of eighteen months. Indeed, in May 2002 a minister in Georgia's government stated that there were 800 Chechen paramilitaries active in Pankisi (along with 100 further guerrillas "of Arab origin").<sup>94</sup> Among the better-known personalities that sought refuge in Pankisi during this period were the Akhmadov brothers,<sup>95</sup> Ruslan Gelayev,<sup>96</sup> Abdul-Malik Mezhidov<sup>97</sup> and Doku Umarov. By 2002 Gelayev had established himself as the local strongman in Pankisi, acquiring corrupt, albeit well-placed, officials in Georgia's interior ministry as patrons, while using his paramilitary unit to intimidate would-be rivals in the local trade in narcotics.<sup>98</sup>

Existing together in such an enclosed geographical and social space for a period of eighteen months, it is fair to assume that Umarov and Gelayev, whatever their past differences, established some kind of *modus vivendi*. The bulk of Gelayev's once impressive fighting force had been decimated by the battle of Komsomolskoye and his subsequent retreat southwards toward the Georgian border.<sup>99</sup> The scantiness of Gelayev's paramilitary outfit was especially marked by the time he reached Pankisi in mid-2001. As a result, Gelayev would hardly have been in a position to dismiss an overture from somebody of Umarov's military experience, whatever the nature of their previous disagreement. Gelayev would remain bivouacked in Pankisi for some considerable time more, launching guerrilla

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<sup>91</sup> Cerwyn Moore, "The Tale of Ruslan Gelayev: Understanding the International Dimensions of the Chechen Wars".

<sup>92</sup> Fuller, "Chechnya: A Look At Slain Leader's Legacy And Successor".

<sup>93</sup> McGregor, "Dokka Umarov: the next in line".

<sup>94</sup> Glenn E. Curtis, *Involvement of Russian organized crime syndicates, criminal elements in the Russian military, and regional terrorist groups in narcotics trafficking in Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Chechnya*, (A Report Prepared by the Federal Research Division, Library of Congress under an Interagency Agreement with the United States Government, October 2002), <http://www.loc.gov/rr/frd/pdf-files/RussianOrgCrime.pdf>.

<sup>95</sup> Svante Cornell, "Is Russia's pressure on Georgia backfiring in Chechnya?", *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, October 9, 2002, <http://www.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/115>.

<sup>96</sup> Mikhail Timofeev, "Bitva pri Galashkakh" [The battle for Galashki], *Nezavisimoe*, October 4, 2002, [http://nvo.ng.ru/wars/2002-10-04/2\\_galashki.html](http://nvo.ng.ru/wars/2002-10-04/2_galashki.html).

<sup>97</sup> "Chechenskie seperatisty perenesli svoy shtab v Pankisi" [Chechen separatists move their headquarters to Pankisi], *Lenta.ru*, October 3, 2002, <http://www.lenta.ru/vojna/2002/10/03/abdulmalik/>.

<sup>98</sup> Curtis, "Involvement of Russian organized crime syndicates, criminal elements in the Russian military".

<sup>99</sup> Moore, "The tale of Ruslan Gelayev: understanding the international dimensions of the Chechen wars".

attacks in southern Chechnya, Ingushetia, and even as far abroad as Abkhazia.<sup>100</sup> Umarov, by contrast, endeavoured to return to Chechnya at the earliest possible opportunity. In August 2002 he returned to his homeland and was quickly appointed to a key position as commander of the “South-Western front”.<sup>101</sup>

Chechnya’s political scene had undergone significant changes since Umarov’s enforced departure in early 2000. The Kremlin had installed Akhmed Kadyrov as its indigenous political-military representative in Chechnya. Formerly Chechnya’s chief mufti, Kadyrov had reportedly been an active participant in the first separatist campaign and had even invoked a holy war against the Russians.<sup>102</sup> Citing disillusionment at the growing influence of Islamic radicals within Chechen society during the inter-war period, Kadyrov reached an agreement with representatives of the Kremlin in late 1999 as a fresh invasion became imminent. Kadyrov employed a mixture of cajolement and coercion to dissuade his countrymen from resisting Russian rule, offering to amnesty leading rebels such as Gelayev, while simultaneously deploying his own militia, headed by his son Ramzan, to harass the families of suspected militants by means of assault, abduction, torture and even murder.<sup>103</sup>

Few specific details are available relating to Umarov’s activities from mid-2002 to mid-2004. Perhaps his most noteworthy achievement was simply staying alive. Gelayev was killed in February 2004 while attempting to cross the border from Dagestan into Georgia.<sup>104</sup> Umarov acted quickly, absorbing the rump of Gelayev’s fighting force into his own command, thereby positioning himself as Gelayev’s natural successor. Often described as a “maverick”, Gelayev had always manifested a pronounced independent streak. His curious decision to abandon his assigned positions during the defense of Grozny, a decision he neglected to coordinate with Maskhadov, is often cited as an example of this independent mindset. Umarov’s relationship with Maskhadov had apparently survived his dismissal as Security Council chairman in 1998. As we have seen, Maskhadov suspected Umarov of dabbling in the hostage-taking trade during the inter-war years, but Umarov’s activities were never deemed treasonous by Maskhadov, merely inappropriate and unacceptable. Maskhadov’s decision to promote Umarov in 2002 indicates that he had no concerns regarding his fealty and courage, concerns he evidently continued to harbour with respect to Gelayev.

With Gelayev’s death, Umarov was able to strengthen his position in Chechnya’s south-western districts: Achkoi-Martanovsky District, Shatoisky District, Itum-Kalinsky District and Urus-Martanovsky District. As Umarov consolidated his influence in these districts he began to forge a closer relationship with another leading field commander, Shamil Basayev. While Umarov and Basayev were known to one another prior to 2004, they are not believed to have been on close terms. The similarities between Umarov and Basayev have already been alluded to: both hailed from distinguished families and both had spent time in Russia during the perestroika era where they flirted

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<sup>100</sup> Miriam Lansky, “Kodori Gorge goes nuts”, *The NIS Observed: An Analytical Review*, vol. 6:17, October 24, 2001, <http://www.bu.edu/iscip/digest/vol6/ed0617.html>.

<sup>101</sup> Emil Souleimanov, “With Sadulaev and Basaev killed, generation change in the Chechen leadership nears”, *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, July 12, 2006, <http://www.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/4048>.

<sup>102</sup> John Russell, “Ramzan Kadyrov: The Indigenous Key to Success in Putin’s Chechenization Strategy?”, *Nationalities Papers*, vol. 36:4, September 2008.

<sup>103</sup> Svante Cornell & Frederick Starr, *The Caucasus: A Challenge For Europe*, Silk Road Paper, June 2006, 60-61.

<sup>104</sup> “Gelayeva pokhoronyat za kolyuchey provolokhoy” [Gelayev to be buried behind barbed wire], *Lenta.ru*, June 18, 2004, <http://lenta.ru/vojna/2004/06/18/gelaev/>.

with organised crime. Both men also enjoyed a somewhat equivocal relationship with Russia's security services. In 1995 Basayev stated forthrightly that he had maintained contacts with high-ranking Russian military officials during his time in Abkhazia.<sup>105</sup> Umarov's interaction with these agencies has been detailed earlier.

Yet the differences between the two were equally as fascinating. Ideologically, Umarov and Basayev, while certainly not at variance, were definitely at different stages of development. In terms of ideology, Umarov was very much a creation of the first Russo-Chechen conflict. He returned to Chechnya in 1992 seeking patronage and protection, with no set ideological outlook. Basayev, while in a sense also a product of the first war, was already familiar with the guerrilla lifestyle; he had seen war in person and was already committed to the cause of an independent Chechnya. Unlike Umarov, he had returned to Chechnya by choice, not because he was sought after by Russian prosecutors. Regardless, in 2004 the two men embarked on a lasting collaboration when Umarov helped Basayev to organise a raid on government targets in Nazran, Ingushetia's largest city. It was to prove a hectic summer for Umarov: in August he was named Maskhadov's minister for state security (essentially a shadow reincarnation of his former Security Council portfolio) before later leading a large-scale rebel raid on Grozny.<sup>106</sup>

The precipitant for the next stage in the advancement of Umarov's political career occurred in March 2005 when Russian Special Forces assassinated Maskhadov in the village of Tolstoy-Yurt, in northern Chechnya.<sup>107</sup> The previous month, Maskhadov had announced a unilateral ceasefire and called on the Russian authorities to enter into peace talks with his government.<sup>108</sup> Maskhadov was replaced by his agreed successor, Abdul-Khalim Sadulayev, an Islamic theologian from Argun, Chechnya. In June, Sadulayev confirmed the appointment of Doku Umarov as his vice-president, thereby thrusting the veteran field-commander into the national and international political limelight.

Knowledge of Umarov's latest promotion was made public only days before he conducted his first major interview with a non-Chechen journalist, Andrei Babitsky of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. Babitsky's interview with Umarov was the first occasion that the new vice-president was subjected to real journalistic scrutiny and he conducted himself adroitly.<sup>109</sup> In the light of Maskhadov's death, Umarov told Babitsky that he was sceptical about his movement's chances of reaching a political settlement with the Kremlin. He also criticized the Beslan school siege of September 2004, when hundreds of school children were taken hostage by guerrillas loyal to Basayev.<sup>110</sup> Umarov's remarks were widely interpreted as a negative appraisal of the tactics employed by Basayev's men at Beslan: "If we were to use those methods, then I think not one of us would be able to return as normal humans". Umarov also stated forthrightly that "in the eyes of the resistance such operations have no legitimacy". In hindsight, Umarov's objections to Basayev's tactics at Beslan are remarkable given his

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<sup>105</sup> Dunlop, "The roots of a separatist conflict", p. 145; Oleg Lukin, "Chechen role in the 1992-3 Georgian-Abkhazian war", *Prague Watchdog*, August 15, 2007, <http://www.watchdog.cz/?show=000000-000005-000004-000151&lang=1>.

<sup>106</sup> "Tretiy posle Maskhadova i Basayeva. Kto takoi Doku Umarov".

<sup>107</sup> Musa Muradov & Sergei Mashkin, "Ubit Aslan Maskhadov" [Aslan Maskhadov killed], *Kommersant*, no. 40, March 9, 2005, <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc.aspx?DocsID=552963>.

<sup>108</sup> Charles W. Blandy, "The End of Ichkeria?", *Conflict Studies Research Centre*, April 2005, <http://www.da.mod.uk/colleges/arag/document-listings/caucasus/>.

<sup>109</sup> Andrei Babitsky, "Russia: RFE/RL Interviews Chechen Field Commander Umarov".

<sup>110</sup> Timothy Phillips, *Beslan: The Tragedy of School No. 1*, (Granta Books: Great Britain, 2007).



recent claim of responsibility for attacks obviously intended to injure and kill civilians, such as the suicide attacks on the Moscow metro in March 2010.<sup>111</sup>

Another aspect of this interview that would be scrutinized closely in the light of later developments in Umarov's political career was his analysis of the phenomenon of radical Islam, or Salafism, within the ranks of the rebel movement. Babitsky, for his part, stated that Umarov was known throughout his homeland as a follower of Sufi Islam who eschewed the radical Islamic agenda championed by the foreign fighters and their indigenous allies. While Umarov dismissed the notion that the rebel movement had been completely infiltrated by "Wahhabis", the colloquial term used by Russian sources when referring to Salafists, he did acknowledge a certain utility to the Sharia (Islamic law), which constitutes the central tenet of the Salafist agenda: "A Muslim, any Muslim, any person must live according to some law. And if a Muslim lives according to Sharia, then Sharia forbids him from goofing around or smoking or doing such things, then I consider that good." Umarov nevertheless described suggestions that he personally was a Wahhabi as "laughable".

## Declaring the Caucasus Emirate

Umarov did not have to wait long for the next opportunity for political advancement to arrive. In June 2006 Sadulayev was killed in a battle with pro-Russian forces.<sup>112</sup> Umarov automatically assumed Sadulayev's duties, naming Basayev as his new vice-president.<sup>113</sup> However, two weeks after his appointment to the vice-presidency, Basayev himself lost his life in obscure circumstances in Ingushetia.<sup>114</sup> Basayev had emerged as the rebels' chief military strategist and his loss was greatly felt. Umarov paid tribute to his erstwhile collaborator, eulogizing him as "the motor of jihad".<sup>115</sup>

At this point, there was a consensus among observers that Umarov would continue to uphold the broad political line established by his predecessors by continuing to fight for an independent Chechnya.<sup>116</sup> Umarov's 2005 interview with Babitsky had persuaded most observers that the new president was essentially a Chechen nationalist, who felt no great enthusiasm for radical Islam. The fact that Umarov had publicly criticized the Beslan school siege in this interview was noted appreciatively by analysts.<sup>117</sup> Umarov's first public statement as president appeared to confirm these widely held impressions:<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> "Dokku Abu Usman: Ataka v Moskovskom metro – eto vozmezdnie za reznuyu v Arshtakh" [Dokka Abu Usman: Attack on the Moscow metro was revenge for the massacre in Arshty], *Kavkazcenter.com*, March 31, 2010, <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/russ/content/2010/03/31/71502.shtml>.

<sup>112</sup> Carl Schreck, "Rebel leader Sadulayev shot dead", *The Moscow Times*, June 19, 2006,

<http://www.themoscowtimes.com/news/article/rebel-leader-sadulayev-shot-dead/204345.html>.

<sup>113</sup> Liz Fuller, "Radical Field Commander Named Chechen Vice President", *RFE/RL Caucasus Report*, vol. 9:23, June 23, 2006.

<sup>114</sup> Nabi Abdullaev, "Basayev Killed in Ingushetia Explosion", *The Moscow Times*, July 11, 2006.

<sup>115</sup> "No Peace Talks With the Russians, Chechen President Says", *Kavkazcenter.com*, September 12, 2006 (last accessed September 13, 2006), <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/eng/content/2006/09/12/5552.shtml>.

<sup>116</sup> Isayev, "Dokka Umarov: A Hawk Flies to the Ichkerian Throne".

<sup>117</sup> McGregor, "Dokka Umarov: The Next in Line".

<sup>118</sup> "The Address to the Nation by Dokka Umarov, President of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria", June 27, 2006, <http://chechenpress.co.uk/english/news/2006/06/27/01.shtml> (last accessed June 27, 2006).

*I have never wanted this job, but I must fulfill my duty, not my wishes. I have made my free choice in 1994, when I decided it was my duty to join those who raised, with weapons in their hands, to defend the freedom and honour of our nation [...]. My vision of finishing the Russian-Chechen war is that Russia should leave us alone, recognizing our legitimate right of self-determination [sic] [...]. I responsibly state that only military and punitive objects will be targets of our strikes [...] [The] Chechen Republic's representatives must dispel the Russian propagandas myth about [the] extremism of our leadership [...].*

These consensual sentiments might have been expressed by any of Umarov's predecessors. Umarov emphasized that the 1997 Khasavyurt Treaty should define future relations between Moscow and Grozny. "According to this treaty," wrote Umarov, "Russia and the Chechen Republic must base their relations on the commonly accepted principals and provisions of international law."<sup>119</sup> The only point of controversy in this inaugural statement centred on Umarov's stated intention to extend the rebels' military activities beyond Chechnya into neighbouring republics (Maskhadov had opposed this strategic departure). Even so, this strategy was pioneered not by Umarov, but by Sadulayev, who had established a region-wide "Caucasus Front" in 2005.<sup>120</sup> Umarov also stated that his government would not actively pursue peace talks with the Russians.<sup>121</sup> As yet, there was no mention of a "Caucasus Emirate"; although Umarov did note that "national traitors" and "war criminals from occupational troops" would be dealt with by the Sharia Court of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria (ChRI).<sup>122</sup>

In less than eighteen months, however, Umarov's political outlook had undergone a radical change. Before going any further, it would be prudent to quote, at length, portions of the statement issued by Umarov in October 2007, wherein he announced the creation of the Caucasus Emirate<sup>123</sup>:

*I am announcing to all Muslims that I am at war against the infidels under the banner of Allah. This means that I, Emir of the Caucasian Mujahideen, reject all infidel laws that have been established in this world. I reject all laws and systems that the infidels have established on the land of the Caucasus. I reject and outlaw all names that the infidels use to split the Muslims. I outlaw all ethnic, territorial and colonial zones named 'North-Caucasian republics', etc. [...]. Today our brothers are fighting in Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia and Palestine [...]. Those who attack Muslims are our common enemies; our enemy is not only Russia, but also America, England, and Israel – all those who conduct war against Islam and Muslims.*

It is no easy challenge to determine exactly how Doku Umarov's worldview was so drastically altered between June 2006 and the autumn of 2007. By proclaiming the Caucasus Emirate, Umarov effectively abrogated the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, reducing Chechnya's status to that of a

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> "Caucasian Front established by decree of ChRI President Sadulayev", *Kavkazcenter.com*, May 20, 2005, <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/eng/content/2005/05/20/3812.shtml>.

<sup>121</sup> "No Peace Talks With the Russians, Chechen President Says".

<sup>122</sup> "The Address to the Nation by Dokka Umarov, President of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria", June 27, 2006, <http://chechenpress.co.uk/english/news/2006/06/27/01.shtml> (last accessed June 27, 2006).

<sup>123</sup> Andrei Smirnov, "Will the Rebels Declare the 'Caucasian Emirate'", *Chechnya Weekly*, vol. 8:42, November 1, 2007; for an abridged English-language version of the declaration see "The official version of Amir Dokka's statement of declaration of the Caucasian Emirate", *Kavkazcenter.com*, November 22, 2007, <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/eng/content/2007/11/22/9107.shtml>.

province, or *Vilayat*, in the new Emirate. The pre-existing consensus that Umarov was a Chechen nationalist and a practitioner of a brand of Sufi Islam native to the North-East Caucasus was automatically called into question. The proclamation also challenged the concept of international law and was viewed in some quarters as being tantamount to a declaration of war on several Western countries.

For orthodox Chechen nationalists, who still cherished the vision of an independent, democratic Chechnya, Umarov's announcement was, in the first instance, a betrayal. The leading voice in the chorus of criticism that followed the declaration of the Emirate belonged to Akhmed Zakayev, by this time a senior minister in the ChRI government. For Zakayev, a secular democrat, the declaration of the Caucasus Emirate challenged the legitimacy of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria. Also, by making common cause with the Afghan Taliban (who engage British forces on a near-daily basis in Helmand Province, Afghanistan), Umarov greatly embarrassed his colleague Zakayev, who had been living in the United Kingdom under political asylum since 2003.

The nature of the prior association between these two men made it difficult for Zakayev to accept Umarov's new ideological departure and at first he declined to blame Umarov directly for the controversy, preferring instead to point the finger at certain Islamic ideologues who were advising him.<sup>124</sup> These persons, Zakayev claimed, were simply masquerading as revolutionaries and were in fact agents of Russia's Federal Security Service, the FSB.<sup>125</sup> It would seem that Zakayev got wind of Umarov's declaration sometime in early October, shortly before its contents became common knowledge beyond Chechnya and the Northern Caucasus. Using his various media outlets, Zakayev suggested that Umarov had been gulled by the FSB into proclaiming the Emirate as part of a grand manoeuvre by the Kremlin to connote the Chechen resistance with al Qaeda.<sup>126</sup> Zakayev rallied the ChRI parliament-in-exile, which issued a statement criticising Umarov's declaration as an attempt to "convert our struggle for national liberation into the category of so-called 'international terrorism'".<sup>127</sup>

Yet there had been indications for some time that Umarov's political outlook was no longer entirely in accordance with Zakayev's. During an interview in April 2006, only months before he became president of the ChRI, Umarov told a Chechen journalist of his ambition to create "a free Muslim state".<sup>128</sup> From the context, it is likely that Umarov was referring to a free Islamic Chechnya, but we can extrapolate from these remarks, as well as certain comments he made in his interview with Babitsky, that Umarov regarded Islam – specifically the Sharia – as a strong foundation for independent statehood. Later that year, in September, Umarov asserted publicly that policy decisions pertaining to the strategic direction of the rebel movement would be subject to the deliberations of the rebels' *majlisi al-shura*, a consultative body including representatives from every rebel front in the

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<sup>124</sup> Liz Fuller, "Chechen Leadership In Exile Seeks To Salvage Legitimacy", *RFE/RL Caucasus Report*, vol. 10;27, <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1347686.html>.

<sup>125</sup> Dmitry Shlapentokh, "The Rise of the Chechen Emirate?", *Middle East Quarterly*, Summer 2008, <http://www.meforum.org/article/1931>.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> "ChRI Parliament Condemns 'Caucasian Emirate' Proclamation", *Chechnya Weekly*, volume 8:44, November 15, 2007.

<sup>128</sup> 'D. Umarov: "My bol'she ne predlozhim Rossii mira"' [D. Umarov: "We will not offer Russia peace"] *Kavkazcenter.com*, April 18, 2006, <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/russ/content/2006/04/18/43822.shtml>.

Northern Caucasus.<sup>129</sup> This meant that as a decision-making forum, the government of the ChRI had been effectively replaced by the *majlisi al-shura*.

After nearly being captured in south-east Chechnya by Russian security forces in November 2006, Umarov decided to winter in the republic of Kabardino-Balkaria. Whilst in Kabardino-Balkaria, Umarov met with the leader of the local insurgency, Anzor Astemirov.<sup>130</sup> Although he was a willing participant in the continuing war against the Russians, Astemirov had concerns about the political direction of the rebel movement. In particular, he disagreed with the rebels' avowed strategic goal of establishing an independent, presidential republic in Chechnya. Possessing a background in Islamic theology, Astemirov believed that the establishment of a Sharia-based Islamic state, be it in Chechnya or elsewhere in the Northern Caucasus, should be the movement's main strategic goal.<sup>131</sup>

In terms of his political ideology, Astemirov had much in common with certain other ideologues in the rebel community, in particular Movladi Udugov, editor of the influential Kavkazcenter.com website, and his half-brother, Isa Umarov. By one account, Isa Umarov was in Nalchik, Kabardino-Balkaria, around this time, where he made direct contact with Astemirov.<sup>132</sup> Soon thereafter, he could be viewed on an internet clip sitting alongside Doku Umarov in a camp somewhere in the Caucasus range.<sup>133</sup> Zakayev has since claimed that it was Isa Umarov who persuaded Umarov to announce the creation of the Caucasus Emirate.<sup>134</sup> This assertion is contradicted by Astemirov, however, who came close to claiming sole credit for the establishment of the Emirate in an article published on Kavkazcenter.com in January 2008.

In this lengthy piece, Astemirov explains to his readership how he had long taken issue with the pre-existing political veneer of the rebel movement.<sup>135</sup> In his view, concepts like republicanism, democracy and universal suffrage are anathema, "disgraceful things". Astemirov tells how he had argued with Basayev about the impropriety of these phenomena being included as part of the rebels' political platform on the grounds that they have no basis in the Sharia. At Basayev's urging, however, Astemirov says that he temporarily set aside these grievances and swore allegiance to Abdul-Khalim Sadulayev, who at that time was president of the ChRI.

When Sadulayev and Basayev were killed in the summer of 2006, Astemirov decided to raise these grievances once more, writing to Umarov directly. According to Astemirov, Umarov responded sympathetically to his litany of complaints:<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> "No Peace Talks With the Russians, Chechen President Says".

<sup>130</sup> Andrei Smirnov, "In the Footsteps of Dokka Umarov: Kadyrov's Trip to Kabardino-Balkaria", *Chechnya Weekly*, May 17, 2007, vol. 8, issue 20, [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/ncw/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=4173&tx\\_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=189&no\\_cache=1](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/ncw/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=4173&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=189&no_cache=1).

<sup>131</sup> Kevin Daniel Leahy, "Anzor Astemirov: From Military Dilettante to Leading Political Strategist", *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, February 11, 2009, <http://www.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/5033>.

<sup>132</sup> Vinatier, "Nord-Caucase: les guerres inachevées".

<sup>133</sup> Mairbek Vatchagaev, "Zakaev's Attempts to Persuade Dokka Umarov are in Vain", *Chechnya Weekly*, volume 9, issue 24, June 19, 2008, [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no\\_cache=1&tx\\_ttnews\[tt\\_news\]=5007](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=5007).

<sup>134</sup> Fuller, "Russia: Is North Caucasus Resistance Still Serious Threat?"

<sup>135</sup> "Amir Sayfullah: 'How we prepared the declaration of the Caucasus Emirate'", *Kavkazcenter.com*, January 1, 2008, <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/eng/content/2008/01/01/9264.shtml>.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

*[...] Amir Dokka wrote in response that he understood all this, that he realized all this and he himself wanted to renounce all this, he just needed to put it into shape correctly from the Sharia point of view [...], and he said that he would issue a strong statement on this topic, and that he did not recognize any law except the Law of Allah, and that he did not seek anybody's pleasure except the pleasure of Allah, so he said it was just a matter of time.*

This initial correspondence between Astemirov and Umarov seems to have taken place in the summer of 2006, shortly after the latter's accession to the presidency. In this context, and given Astemirov's claim that Umarov was receptive to his agenda, Umarov's decision to spend that winter in Kabardino-Balkaria is of real significance. Clearly, Astemirov's correspondence had piqued the new president's interest. Umarov's interest in Astemirov's political agenda was quickly noted by Movladi Udugov and Isa Umarov. While Udugov continued to reside abroad, his half-brother maintained a presence at Doku Umarov's side.<sup>137</sup> Using their political influence and considerable media savvy, these two individuals waged a propaganda campaign throughout 2007, agitating for the establishment of the type of Islamic state envisaged by Astemirov.<sup>138</sup>

It has been established that indications suggesting a favourable attitude on Doku Umarov's part toward the idea of a Sharia-based state were in evidence from as early as 2005. After his communion with Astemirov, however, Umarov considered more seriously the potential utility of a Sharia as the bedrock of future statehood. During an interview in March 2007, Umarov suggested that the Sharia might serve as a useful foundation for a more ambitious political project than an independent Chechnya.<sup>139</sup>

*I will remind you that the peoples of North Caucasus have experience of joint statehood. During the time of Sheikh Mansur, Imam Shamil and The Mountain Republic, as well as the North Caucasian Emirate of Sheikh Uzun-Hadji[...]. The basis of this association was always Islam, and in the case of the Mountain republic – the idea of all Caucasus unity and decolonization.*

Later that March, Umarov gave another indication of his newfound political affinities by appointing Supyan Abdullayev as his vice-president.<sup>140</sup> In terms of his ideological and political outlook, Abdullayev was identical to Astemirov. It was also reported that Abdullayev was on good terms with Udugov and Isa Umarov,<sup>141</sup> and his appointment can be regarded as another sign of their growing

<sup>137</sup> Bukhari Barayev: "Istinnye Chechenty podderzhivayut reshenie Dokki Umarova i Modzhakhedov" [True Chechens supported the decision of Doku Umarov and the mujahedin] *kavkazanhaamash.com*, January 21, 2008, <http://kavkazanhaamash.com/content/view/102/31/>.

<sup>138</sup> Vinatier, "Nord-Caucase: les guerres inachevées".

<sup>139</sup> "Interview with Dokka Umarov", March 8, 2007.

<sup>140</sup> Gordon M. Hahn, "The Jihadi Insurgency and the Russian Counterinsurgency in the North Caucasus", *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 24:1 (2008): 19.

<sup>141</sup> Ruslan Isayev, "Views of Chechen residents on the declaration of a 'Caucasus Emirate'", *Prague Watchdog*, November 1, 2007, <http://www.watchdog.cz/?show=000000-000004-000001-000214&lang=1> (last accessed July 20, 2010); Isa Umarov and Supyan Abdullayev were reportedly active in the Chechen branch of the Islamic Renaissance Party in the late 1980s, early 1990s, see Musa Muradov, "Sevodnya Moskva nakhoditsya pod Chechney" [Today Moscow is under Chechnya] *Kommersant "Vlast"*, no 42, October 26, 2009, <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc.aspx?DocsID=1258916>.

influence over the president. Umarov again visited Kabardino-Balkaria that March as part of a tour of the Caucasus Front.<sup>142</sup> He is likely to have met with Astemirov once more sometime during this visit.

In April, Umarov provided further evidence of his growing faith in the utility of Sharia law by establishing a “Sharia Guard” in Chechnya. He appointed Abdul-Malik Mezhidov, a one-time ally of Arbi Barayev and a well-known Wahhabi,<sup>143</sup> to head this new body.<sup>144</sup> In September, Umarov appointed Astemirov to the post of Chairman of the Sharia Court of the ChRI. Probably sensing that a seminal declaration from Umarov was close at hand, Astemirov chose to ignore the disagreeable appellation of the office in question and accepted the appointment. The next month, an audio cassette began circulating in Chechnya on which Doku Umarov announced the establishment of a “Caucasus Emirate” that would incorporate all the republics of the Northern Caucasus. Umarov was to be the Emir of this new institutional structure, thus completing his transition from racketeer to Emir.

## Conclusion

Unravelling Doku Umarov’s life and career is a serious challenge due to the dearth of objective information at hand. There are periods of his life, indeed, about which we know practically nothing; his childhood, for example. Seminal events in his life are invariably subject to contradictory reports. However, with what little information we possess about his background and his military-political career, it is possible to make some general deductions about Umarov’s character.

Throughout his political career, and before that even, Umarov has shown himself to be a skilled courtier. Early on in his career, as he cultivated the likes of Musa Atayev,<sup>145</sup> Ruslan Gelayev and Daud Akhmadov, Umarov used the bonds of kinship, and even marriage, to advance his prospects. Later, when his military prestige had grown, Umarov was able to use his status as a paramilitary leader, as well as his extensive political contacts, to commend himself to Chechnya’s besieged inter-war leader, Aslan Maskhadov. At a later stage, these attributes would also commend him to Movladi Udugov, Isa Umarov and Anzor Astemirov. As we have seen, at the same time that he was chairing Maskhadov’s Security Council, Umarov managed to maintain strong working relationships with some of the Maskhadov regime’s staunchest critics. During the period 1997–1999, there were very few Chechen politicians who could lay claim to being on fair terms simultaneously with Maskhadov, Gelayev, Barayev and Raduyev. This fact alone is proof of Umarov’s adeptness at political networking.

Apart from his rejection of Russian suzerainty in Chechnya, it is difficult to ascribe a specific political program to Umarov during the period, 1992–2007. It is possible that the image of Umarov as a politically ambiguous individual was self-cultivated, so as to enable him to make contacts more easily among Chechnya’s competing factions. His perceived political neutrality was definitely an advantage to him in dealing with the stand-off in Gudermes in July 1998, for example.

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<sup>142</sup> See internet clip of Umarov’s journey to Kabardino-Balkaria:

<http://il.youtube.com/watch?v=ip7KMehI6l8&feature=related>.

<sup>143</sup> “Komandir Shariatskoy Gvardii otstrelivalsya do poslednevo patrona” [Commander of the Sharia Guard fired until the last bullet], *Kommersant*, no. 48, March 31, 2001, <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc-rss.aspx?DocsID=250725>.

<sup>144</sup> “Ukaz prezidenta ChRI “O Shariatskoy Gvardii” [Decree of the president of ChRI “About the Sharia Guard”],

*Kavkazcenter.com*, April 28, 2007, <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/russ/content/2007/04/28/50733.shtml>.

<sup>145</sup> Atayev functioned as one of Umarov’s foreign representatives until he was shot dead in Istanbul in February 2009.

Umarov's career is also remarkable for the political ruthlessness he has shown when the needs of the moment have demanded it. His decision to proclaim the Caucasus Emirate is perhaps the primary example of this ruthlessness. Umarov's political instinct has always driven him to make alliances with people of influence. By proclaiming the Emirate, Umarov sought to court favour with the increasingly powerful non-Chechen elements of the resistance, and possibly to invite additional funding from Middle Eastern sources. The political influence once exercised by Zakayev and his supporters had dwindled in the years preceding the announcement of the Emirate. As a result, severing his fellowship with Zakayev was an acceptable price for Umarov to pay in order to gain the support of more influential parties elsewhere in the rebel community.

For much of his political career Umarov has been a conciliatory presence, careful to avoid making enemies needlessly, always positioning himself to attract support from influential people, whatever their political background. Umarov's talent for making political contacts, allied with his political elusiveness, have served him well so far in his career. When examining Umarov's newfound enthusiasm for the rule of Islamic law, one must be mindful of these qualities, while also bearing in mind the growing power of the non-Chechen elements of the resistance movement.