The Arab Foreign Fighters and the Sacralization of the Chechen Conflict

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Introduction

In 1999, an unnamed Chechen leader confided his fears about the arrival of hundreds of foreign *mujahideen* in Chechnya to a *Washington Post* reporter: "We do not need them, they will give us a lot of trouble, but we won't be able to stop them."[1] Considering the events that have unfolded on the ground in the Caucasus over the last ten years, these words sound ominously prophetic.

While it is common for states to have a dramatic impact on the dynamics and even final outcome of internal conflicts in which they are not directly involved, it is extremely rare for external non-state actors to play such a significant role. Those who voluntarily intervene generally limit their support to financing, training, or providing weapons and technology to one side. In some cases they fight, but their intervention rarely alters the face of the conflict. Foreign *jihadi*s, the phalanxes of Islamist volunteer combatants that have decided to join the global *jihad* and fight in various internal conflicts on behalf of Muslims against those they deem to be infidel enemies, have often sought this role. Foreign *mujahideen* have fought with Muslim separatists in Afghanistan, in the Philippines, in defense of local Muslims in Bosnia and other areas of the Balkans, supporting Islamist movements in Algeria, Tajikistan, Kashmir, Somalia, Yemen, and Eritrea. And yet, while these experiences were crucial for developing and maintaining a global *jihadi* movement with operational ties among many radical groups, their impact on the internal conflicts themselves has often been negligible. Even in Afghanistan, despite claims by the foreign *mujahideen*, Russian and American analysts of the conflict generally believe that the Afghan war was won by Afghan fighters and not by the Arabs.[2]

Chechnya is the exception to the rule. Although foreign Arab fighters numbered just a few dozen when they first arrived in the region around the mid-1990s and never reached a numerically imposing presence in Chechnya's fifteen years of war, foreign Arab fighters have played an essential role in shaping the conflict far beyond their numbers. Today the character, actors, tactics, and very nature of the ongoing second Chechen war have all been profoundly influenced by the activities of the foreign *mujahideen* who have successfully "sacralized" a separatist conflict into a militant Islamist uprising.

Arab Fighters During the First Chechen War and the Interwar Period

Small groups of Afghan Arabs entered the Caucasus at the start of the 1990s, enticed by the conflicts in Abkhazia and Nagorno-Karabakh. Reportedly, the first Afghan Arab to reach Chechnya was a Jordanian of Chechen descent, Sheik Fathi, whose presence attracted other veterans of the Afghan *jihad*.[3] In 1995, a small group led by Ibn ul Khattab, a charismatic Saudi national who had gained notoriety fighting in Afghanistan with *jihadi* icons like Abdullah Azzam, Hassan al Sarehi, and Osama Bin Laden, reached Chechnya after a short period fighting in Tajikistan's civil war.[4] Also in 1995, al-Qaeda dispatched a few operatives to Chechnya where one of its key front-charities, Illinois-based Benevolence International Foundation (BIF), became active in providing material support to Fathi, Khattab, and other *mujahideen*.[5]

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Despite the presence of foreign fighters, the first Chechen War represented a quintessential nationalist conflict where an Islamic dimension was almost nonexistent. Aside from a fringe group of radicals headed by the future president of Chechnya, Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev, the vast majority of Chechen politicians and commanders to lead the independence movement were committed nationalists, largely unaffected by religion.[6] Jokhar Dudayev, the undisputed leader of the first war, was a former Soviet general whose knowledge of Islam was minimal. His aim was to build a state preserving Chechnya's social structure and Islamic identity within a rigidly secular state framed by a modern constitution with freedom of religion and the preservation of rights for both Chechens and Russians.[7]

The Wahhabis, an extreme sect of Islam financed and spread largely by Saudi Arabians, had radically different plans for Chechnya. For Khattab, Chechnya was another Muslim nation like Afghanistan under attack from the infidels. Furthermore, he saw Chechnya as a country to liberate, Islamize, and use as a model for the conquest of all Muslim lands in the Caucasus and southern Russia.[8] While very few among the Chechen population and leadership embraced this view, external support was needed to overcome the military disparity with the Russians. As a result, the foreign Wahhabis were welcomed by most Chechens.

As marginal players during the first war, the foreign *mujahideen* gained influence in the interwar period. Respected by Chechen authorities for their military skills and courted for the external funding from Islamic charities and wealthy foreign donors, the Arabs established strong links with some Chechen commanders. According to Khattab, after the conflict ended in 1996 the Arabs, "were asked by the [Chechen] civil and military leadership and the President to train the people because nobody was convinced the Russians would completely withdraw."[9] In fact, Khattab was officially hired by the Chechen government to establish the Chechen Armed Forces' Training Center in a former Soviet facility near the village of Serzhen-Yurt.[10] With money and instructors arriving from Afghanistan and the Middle East to the newly independent republic, Khattab established another three camps, training an average of 400 people per two-month session.[11]

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Russian authorities estimate that up to 2,500 fighters were trained in the camps during the interwar period.[12] The trainees were not only locals, but also came from other Muslim regions in the Caucasus, southern Russia, and Central Asia. Lessons in military techniques, such as mine laying and ambushing tactics, were combined with a religious indoctrination that followed a strict Wahhabi curriculum and was supervised by scholars from Saudi Arabia and Pakistan.[13]

Shortly after the January 1997 elections, the unity among Chechens that had characterized the first conflict ceased to exist and some Chechen commanders began to embrace the radical ideology espoused by Khattab. While some clans and commanders remained loyal to the newly-elected president Aslan Maskhadov, a committed nationalist who, like Dudayev, desired a secular independent state with friendly relations toward Moscow, many commanders strayed from his command. Clan-based militias also splintered, with some militias renouncing any ideology, whether nationalist or Islamist. Some groups turned to crime and banditry, while others found it more convenient to join forces with Khattab.

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It is very likely that at least a few commanders turned to Khattab hoping to satisfy personal economic and political ambitions with Saudi support. Money also played a key role in attracting soldiers. According to Russian media reports, clerics who "converted" to Wahhabism were given a lump sum of $1,000-$1,500, in addition to receiving a monthly salary. Recruiters also received small sums for each recruit.[14] While it is impossible to estimate what percentage of Chechen fighters turned their backs to the central government during the interwar period, it is undeniable that Maskhadov lost control of large parts of the country within a few months of his electoral victory.

Conflicting personal ambitions, inexperienced leadership, widespread corruption, Russian interference, a nonexistent economy, and nationwide insecurity rapidly brought Chechnya to the point of complete implosion. Moreover, banditry grew rampant with easy access to cheap

and light arms, and the absence of a central government to enforce the rule of law. Armed militias who had previously fought the Russian army devoted their military efforts to kidnapping and attacks on trains and businesses, further eroding Maskhadov's authority across Chechnya and discouraging foreign investments in the country.

As the situation rapidly deteriorated, conflicting views over the future of Chechnya emerged. While all Chechens agreed on an independent Chechnya, there was little agreement on the type of nation it should be. Basayev, Yandarbiyev, and other Wahhabized commanders publicly expressed a desire to turn Chechnya into a strict Islamic state. Taking advantage of Maskhadov's weakness, the newly-formed alliance of foreign fighters and Wahhabized commanders acted upon their words and began to create a state within the state.

Wahhabis elected to the government began adopting legislation to Islamize Chechen society. Soviet laws were replaced by a form of *shariah* modeled on the Sudanese legal system and Islamic courts were established across Chechnya under the supervision of Islam Khalimov, a close associate of Khattab and Minister of *shariah* state security.[15] A Saudi Afghan Arab and close associate of Khattab, Abu Omar Al Seif, was put in charge of organizing the new legal system and was later given the title of Head of the Court of Cassation of Chechnya.[16]

Graduates of Khattab's camps became the enforcers and defenders of this state within the state, making it more difficult for the central government to control. When the Chechen central government in Grozny attempted to exert pressure and influence over these Wahhabi enclaves, it met harsh resistance. In 1998 armed fights between troops loyal to Maskhadov and Wahhabi militias broke out near Gudermes. After the bloody clashes, Maskhadov sacked many Wahhabi officials (including Khalimov[17]), dissolved the *shariah* guards and issued a deportation order against Khattab.[18] The Saudi commander not only ignored the order, but also solidified his alliance with Shamil Basayev, deputy Prime Minister of Chechnya at the time.[19] The two built new training camps around Urus Martan and, according to Akhmadov, "the financial support from the Vakhabites abroad enabled [them] to function without any financial support from the state bodies of Ichkeria."[20]

Tensions increased in July 1997 when a revolt erupted in Urus Martan as parts of the Chechen National Guard, headed by Arby Barayev, sided with the Wahhabis and clashed with Sufi militias from Gudermes. The revolt did not escalate into civil war due in large part to Basayev and Khattab's decision not to participate in the feud. Nonetheless, the fracture between Sufis and Wahhabis had reached the point of no return. While the Sufi Congress of the Caucasus pushed to ban Wahhabism through legislation, the Grand Mufti, Akhmad Khadyrov, issued a *fatwa* denouncing the Wahhabis as "enemies of Islam and the Chechen nation."[21]

Maskhadov took further action and ordered the expulsion of foreign Wahhabis. He proclaimed: "[We are] no longer going to tolerate foreign nationals in our land who are trying to enforce their rules and…split the Chechen society into different groups, movements, and parties, so as to prevent the building of an independent Chechen state."[22] The Wahhabis responded by turning to the Supreme Shariah Court of Chechnya. The court ultimately ruled that Maskhadov had violated laws and ordered the suspension of the elected parliament. Institutional chaos reached its apex when parliament, in turn, declared the Shariah Court unconstitutional. Maskhadov attempted to deflect the tension by issuing a decree that introduced full *shariah* law in Chechnya, but the decision only emboldened the Wahhabis.

The Expansion of War into Dagestan

Basayev's intention to "go further" manifested itself in Dagestan, another troubled Russian territory in the Caucasus. As a predominantly Muslim population with close cultural ties to Chechnya, Dagestanis fought alongside the Chechens against Russian imperialism in the 19th century. After the Bolshevik takeover, the two provinces united under Sufism to fight for the defense of the independent North Caucasus Republic.[23]

During the Soviet era, Dagestanis accepted Moscow's rule with less animosity than their Chechen neighbors, and once the communist regime fell, no major independence movement developed. A partial explanation for this different attitude is found in Dagestan's fragmented ethnic mosaic with less than two million people and thirty-four distinct ethnic groups. Traditionally, the main allegiance lies in the *djamaat*, the village or small group of villages, that, according to Matthew Evangelista, operates "more or less like an ancient city-state."[24] This lack of unity, while preventing the development of nationalistic impulses, constituted fertile ground for potential inter-communitarian animosities that religious fundamentalists sought to exploit immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Foreign Wahhabi missionaries began to appear in Dagestan in the late 1980s and became a

serious force in the following decade when they financed the construction of several mosques throughout the poverty-stricken region.[25] In most cases, Wahhabi imams lured local youth to convert to their radical interpretation of Islam by offering them money, jobs, and a sense of much-needed purpose after the chaos that followed the disintegration of the Soviet Union. In a region where unemployment for men ages 18 to 28 was 60%[26] and the per capita GNP was $60,[27] the $30 reportedly given by Wahhabi missionaries to every convert attracted many young Dagestanis.[28] Over time, Wahhabi enclaves were created in parts of the state where the influence of the central government was weak and local *djamaat* leaders welcomed foreign money. While most *djamaats* and large segments of the Dagestani population remained loyal to their moderate Sufi traditions, villages like Karamakhi, Chabanmaki, and Kadar became Wahhabi enclaves within the Russian Federation by the end of the 1990s. These villages enforced their own strict interpretation of Islamic law, forbidding music and forcing women to wear the full veil or *niqab*, a garment completely foreign to traditional Caucasian customs. Trenches were dug and checkpoints and border posts were also erected by the Wahhabis to signal their *de facto* independence from secular Dagestan.[29]

The Wahhabi invasion of Dagestan triggered the start of the second Chechen War, which continues today

By 1998, Dagestani police had lost complete control in the portions of the state controlled by Wahhabis. "[The Wahhabis] tried to lure people in a friendly way at first," recounted the Sufi imam of Karamakhi, Magomed Makhdiyev. "But by 1999, they were saying, 'Join us or we'll cut your head off.'"[30] Dagestani and Arab Wahhabis, most of whom had trained in Khattab's camps in Chechnya, began attacking various Dagestani state institutions, assaulting police stations and kidnapping officials.[31] The rift with the Sufis became insurmountable when the Wahhabis killed the Sufi mufti of Dagestan. The trouble facing Dagestan in 1998 was expressed by Russia's Interior Minister: "We believe the greatest threat comes from Islamic fundamentalism, namely Wahhabism. It is a special from of extremism similar to terrorism."[32]

Dagestan was ideal for Khattab's goal of creating a pan-Caucasian Islamic state because of the strong ties with Wahhabis. In the tight-knit and clan-based Caucasian societies, one way to establish close relationships is through marriage. In fact, Khattab and sixteen of his men adapted to the clan structure by marrying Dagestani women from Karamakhi.

Other prominent Dagestani Wahhabis soon settled in Chechnya where Chechen radicals such as Basayev and Yandarbiyev welcomed them. In April 1998, these forces formed the Congress of the Peoples of Chechnya and Dagestan, calling for a unified theocratic state. Shamil Basayev was elected its chair, even though he still officially served in Maskhadov's government as acting Prime Minister.[33] Hundreds of Dagestani Wahhabis also trained in Khattab's camps and, in some cases, Chechen and Arab fighters crossed the border to join their Dagestani brothers in attacks against Dagestani police forces and Russian patrols. The responsibility for these actions was often claimed by the "Central Front for the Liberalization of the Caucasus and Dagestan," a group promoting a call to *jihad* in Dagestan.[34]

Foreign-imported Wahhabism had usurped power in another weak province of Russia. Wahhabi forces had expanded from Chechnya to Dagestan and used it as a new base of operations to continue its fight against Russia. By 1998, Russian authorities publicly recognized Wahhabism as a major threat to the security of the Federation[35] and understood they could not tolerate further propagation to its Muslim population of 15 million.[36] Frequent attacks on government facilities carried out by Chechen-trained militants (not only in Dagestan, but also in other areas of the Caucasus and southern Russia) contributed to Moscow's fear and anger. Russia could not possibly tolerate the presence of a weak, violence-ridden, and aggressive state on the border of its weakest region.

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Anatol Lieven describes Russia's situation as, "a modern state's nightmare… It is as if Moscow had a mixture of Afghanistan and Sierra Leone for a neighbor."[37] The problem only increased because those who were *de facto* in charge of the country were intent on subtracting large parts of Russian territory to fulfill their perceived religious duty.

In May 1998 militiamen linked to the Khachilaev brothers, and supported by many of Khattab's men, seized Dagestan's State Council building.[38] Other skirmishes also broke out at the start of 1999 involving Chechen-trained militants. Despite Maskhadov's pending deportation order

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against Khattab, the Congress of the Peoples of Chechnya and Dagestan commanded him to lead a force of 700 Arab and Chechen fighters. The force, a *de facto* parallel army, was called the "Peacekeeping Brigade" and was designed to intervene in the case of a Russian attack against the Wahhabi villages in Dagestan.[39] At this point, the tensions both inside Chechnya and with Russia had reached a breaking point.

Maskhadov, fearing a Basayev attack in Dagestan, removed Basayev from his position as deputy commander in chief of the Chechen army. Due to Maskhadov's weakness and isolation, he was in no position to stop Basayev and Khattab.[40] In August 1999, a brigade of Chechen and foreign fighters crossed the border from Chechnya into Dagestan with the declared objective of defending the Wahhabi villages of Dagestan that had been surrounded by Russian federal forces determined to re-establish Russian sovereignty in the area. Basayev and Khattab, who had received *fatwas* from Saudi and Pakistani clerics legitimizing their holy war, led a 2,000-man force to cleanse Dagestan from world Zionism, not exactly the enemy most Chechens had in mind when they took up arms in 1994.[41] In the first days of conflict, the Wahhabis conquered 36 villages and declared the creation of the independent Islamic State of Dagestan. They established the Islamic Shura of Dagestan as its governing body, immediately nominated Basayev as its commander, established *shariah* law over its occupied territory, and declared war on Russia.

Moscow did not tolerate the invasion of its territory and formally declared war. Russian federal forces, together with thousands of Dagestani police officers and villagers who rejected the presence of Wahhabis, attacked the Wahhabi enclave in Dagestan and liberated it in less than a month, forcing most of the fighters back to Chechnya. It is noteworthy that many Dagestani peasants sided with Moscow, clearly stating their preference for traditional Sufism, democracy, and peaceful coexistence with Russia.[42] Vladimir Putin, who was appointed Prime Minister by Boris Yeltsin shortly after the Dagestani invasion, decided that Russia's drive should not stop at the Chechen border and deemed it necessary to uproot the social and political conditions that permitted the foreign invasion. What had started as a conquest quickly turned into a defensive war for the Chechen Wahhabis. Backed by strong public support, Putin ordered Russian-led attacks to continue in Chechnya, bombing Wahhabi strongholds in places like Vedeno, Urus-Martan, and Gudermes.[43] The Wahhabi invasion of Dagestan triggered the start of the second Chechen War, which continues today.

The Wahhabi motives for the Dagestani invasion are multidimensional. First, the desire to defend Wahhabi villages in Dagestan from the Russian attack and create a united Islamic state constitutes an important reason. However, pure ambition and personal gain also accounted for why some Chechen warlords participated in the invasion. Additionally, access to the Caspian Sea and the opportunity to profit from the Dagestani oil pipeline were other strong motivating reasons for some leaders.[44]

Wahhabi Tactics for the New War

The second Chechen War was triggered by the Wahhabis' actions, where war dynamics and tactics bore the characteristics of the foreign *mujahideen*. With the second stage of operations under way, the Islamic fighters developed completely different fighting tactics to avoid being targeted by Russian mass bombings as in Dagestan. Purely military methods of the first Chechen War gave way to military-political ones.[45] With these intentions, Khattab announced the *mujahideen*'s new strategy after the Dagestani debacle. He was soon successful. In the three weeks following the defeat in Dagestan, a series of bombings ravaged apartment complexes and shopping centers inside Russia, killing more than 300 people.[46] Russian investigators arrested the perpetrators who were mostly Chechens and Dagestanis and had received training in explosives in Khattab's camps. Some of them confessed to personally receiving several hundred thousand dollars from Khattab to carry out the attacks.[47]

The 1999 bombings were indicative of what was to come. Chechens had resorted to terrorism in the first conflict, but with less frequency and brutality. Until 1999, Chechen fighters (including Basayev) had hijacked airplanes and placed explosive devices in public places around Russia, but these actions were mostly demonstrative, designed to frighten Moscow and attract the attention of the international community. Even the deadly 1995 Budennovsk siege, where more than one hundred hostages were killed in the battle that ensued after Basayev and his men barricaded themselves inside the local hospital, was more a by-product of a military operation gone astray than a terrorist operation designed to kill civilians.[48] But in the second war, terrorism became the weapon of choice of the Chechen Wahhabis.

Unlike the first war, today Chechen fighters limit their actions inside Chechnya to ambushes and terrorism. After crushing defeats at the end of 1999, the *mujahideen* relied exclusively on hit-and-

run tactics.[49] Unable to face Russian forces in open territory, the *mujahideen* established their bases in the mountains, and left their posts only to ambush Russian forces who rarely ventured away from the plains around Grozny. Commonly used forms of attack included car-bombings, kidnappings, and the use of suicide vehicles against military installations. Russian authorities revealed that the most frequent form of attack consisted of roadside bomb detonations and the subsequent attack on Russian convoys with heavy gunfire.[50] While successful in causing a relatively high number of casualties among Russian forces (and in obtaining much-needed weapons), these tactics failed to guarantee any territorial gain, highlighting the *mujahideen*'s lack of clear military strategy or goals.

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Since 1999, *mujahideen* trained in Khattab's camps carried out hundreds of attacks both in Chechnya and Russia. While the perpetrators are mostly from Chechnya and various regions of the Caucasus and southern Russia, their trainers are predominantly Arab.[51] In 2003, Colonel Ilya Shabalkin, spokesman for the Russian forces in Chechnya, indicated that only about 200 foreign fighters were present in the region but highlighted their importance: "The Arabs are the specialists, they are the experts in mines and communications."[52] Confirming Shabalkin's assessment, the forensic analysis of the landmines and detonators used most recently by Chechen fighters indicate that identical designs and mechanisms have been employed in the Middle East and other areas where *jihadists* are active.[53] In 2002, a small group of Arab *mujahideen* established a presence in the Pankisi Gorge, a remote area of Georgia neighboring Chechnya where Chechen fighters gain shelter against Russian attacks. Reportedly, the Arabs were computer, communications and financial specialists, military trainers, chemists, and bombers who established a base of operations to support Khattab's group inside Chechnya, while simultaneously preparing for terrorist attacks against American and Western targets in Russia and Central Asia.[54]

Terrorism has called the world's attention to Chechnya. Aside from technical expertise, Arabs provide religious guidance with *fatwa*s being issued by clerics close to Khattab and his successors Abu Walid and Abu Hafs al-Urdani to justify terrorist attacks and martyrdom operations. Moreover, one cannot avoid blaming the growing Wahhabi influence for the arrival of suicide attacks in Chechnya. While no suicide attack had taken place in the region before 2000 and the strong presence of Wahhabis, the last five years have been marred by dozens of suicide attacks, many of whom are women, both inside and outside Chechnya.[55] Scores of suicide bombers have blown themselves up in Moscow's subway system, at a rock concert, and on two Russian airliners. Teams of ready-to-die fanatics who had trained in Khattab's camps carried out the brazen operations of the Dubrovka Theater and Beslan. Russian authorities, have blamed most of these attacks had been planned and financed by Khattab and Abu Walid.[56]

Paul Murphy has outlined a list of reasons that can explain why terrorism has supplanted traditional war, and even guerrilla tactics, in Chechnya. Murphy believes Chechens have embraced terrorism because: "Other options are limited; it is inexpensive and attracts bigger foreign investment; Basayev's power has grown; and Chechens have become impatient."[57] All these reasons are valid but should be considered in light of the drastic change of perspective brought to the region by the Wahhabis. The enemy, as well as the nature of the conflict itself, is now seen by many of the fighters through the lens of Wahhabism, turning it into a cosmic religious war between good and evil, and Allah and infidelity. While the large majority of the Chechen population proudly upholds its Sufi heritage, most of the fighters are Wahhabis and have a powerful influence over how the conflict is fought. Naturally, when a war takes these characteristics and becomes "sacralized", all constraints disappear, the use of violence becomes legitimized, and atrocities become routine.[58] All Russians and non-Russians who do not support the Wahhabi project are enemies and do not deserve any mercy, as they are opposing God's will. The enemy is dehumanized and satanized, being described as a cruel demon that needs to be killed to obey a divine order.[59]

The Wahhabis fight today's war as a cosmic confrontation in which all is permitted and where civilian casualties, even on their own side, are irrelevant collateral damages

One aspect where this shift is most evident is in the attitude of the combatants toward their own population. While the first Chechen War can be duly characterized as a genuine popular struggle to obtain independence, today's conflict is fought by lawless groups of militiamen, bandits, and religious extremists who do not bother to fight the battle for the hearts and minds of the local

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population. Human Rights Watch, for example, has documented many cases in which Arab fighters refused to leave Chechen villages after locals told them their presence was attracting the attention of the Russian army. "[The foreign fighters] were not defending us but were there only out of their own interest," recounted residents of Alkhan-Yurt, a Chechen village attacked by Russian forces. "Some of the fighters said they would not go because they had taken the vow of *Ghazavat* (*jihad*)."[60] Chechen villages are often subjected to harsh punitive measures by Russian forces once the foreign fighters leave, something that seems inconsistent with the Chechen fighters' commitment of defending every Chechen life and inch of land during the first war. While Dudayev's men in the first war were fighting for the defense of their own nation, Khattab and Basayev's fighters can be duly characterized as ideological insurgents who prioritize their religious war over the wellbeing of the Chechen people.

The Wahhabis fight today's war as a cosmic confrontation in which all is permitted and where civilian casualties, even on their own side, are irrelevant collateral damages. The foreign *mujahideen* have become famous for their cold-blooded executions of Russian soldiers and many gruesome videos that circulate in Islamist circles show Khattab and his disciples torturing and beheading captured Russian prisoners.[61] This complete neglect for the laws of war is also reflected in their treatment of war prisoners. In contrast, during the first war prisoners were treated with relative decency and many exchanges of prisoners took place. Reports also indicate that mutual acts of decency and kindness did indeed occur—Chechens in some cases fed starving Russian soldiers.[62]

Dela or Allah, *Adat* or *Shariah*, Peace or *Jihad*? A Grim Future

At the end of November 2005, President Putin hailed the results of the elections held in Chechnya, where pro-Moscow candidates won an overwhelming majority.[63] As he has done in the past, Putin is trying to control the situation in Chechnya by delegating authority to a mix of Russian civilian and military administrators and Chechen leaders who have decided to cooperate with Moscow. While this is probably the best tactic Russia can employ to keep Chechnya under its control, it is hardly a success since violence still plagues everyday life in the region.

Moscow's new ally in Chechnya is the Sufi clergy. Even though they fought alongside other Chechen forces in the first conflict, many Sufi clerics and brotherhoods cast their support to Russian federal forces at the start of the second war. Motivated by their desire for peace and deep-rooted hatred for the Wahhabis, some of them established friendly relationships with Russian officials and even took up arms against the Wahhabis, similar to what Dagestani brotherhoods did in 1999.[64] In 2000, Putin appointed the former Sufi Grand Mufti Akhmad Khadyrov as Civilian Administrator of Chechnya, a move that signified the definitive split among Chechens on the relationship with Russia. In response to his appointment, Khadyrov was convicted of apostasy in March 2001 by the Wahhabi Shariah Court and sentenced to death.[65] After repeated attempts on his life, Khadyrov was killed in May 2004 by a bomb placed under the stands of Grozny's stadium while attending a military parade, confirming the instability of the institutions backed by Moscow inside Chechnya.

The fight between Wahhabis and Sufis in Chechnya is both political and religious, a battle for the soul of Islam in the Caucasus and, consequently, for the political future of the region. During his presidency, Maskhadov had repeatedly accused foreign Wahhabis of planning to turn Chechnya into another Taliban-run Afghanistan, highlighting their differences with Sufism. "We are Naqshbandi and Qadari Sufis," said Maskhadov, "There is no place for any other Islamic sects in Chechnya."[66] While it is clearly in the best interest of some Chechen warlords to exploit them for personal gain, the differences between traditional Chechen Sufis and the foreign-imported Wahhabis cannot be overstated. Sufism has been an important factor rallying Chechens and other Caucasian peoples against the Russians during the last three centuries, but Islam, contrary to the Wahhabis' core belief, was not seen as a factor shaping everyday life. First of all, local rules and customs such as the *adat*, a local penal code, are more important than the almost unknown *shariah* law, and Chechens' first allegiance is to their *teip*, or clan, not to the universalist concept of the Islamic *umma*.[67] Moreover, Chechen Sufism is filled with local customs of pagan origin such as the veneration of saints, the belief in miracles, and the importance of ritualistic dances, all concepts that are anathema to the Wahhabis.[68] Chechens have traditionally referred to God with the Chechen word "Dela" and not with the Arabic "Allah," a clear sign of the strength of their pre-Islamic traditions that have shaped their form of Sufism.[69] As the war continues and desperation grows, the differing views over the role of religion, the nature of the conflict, and the structure of their own society have caused serious rifts among Chechens. While the majority of Chechens have not embraced

radical Islam, a growing percentage of the few thousand individuals fighting on the ground today have. More importantly, many of today's most charismatic and powerful Chechen leaders appear to have committed themselves to Wahhabi ideology. For some of them, such as Shamil Basayev (who has even Arabized his name into Amir Abdallah Shamil Abu-Idris[70]), the conversion to Wahhabism seems to be heartfelt. Others wage their own private wars, covering their self-serving actions under the mantle of the Chechen struggle and their conversion to Wahhabism is "a convenient tool for attaining separatist ends"[71] or to gain personal power, a façade that reminds the public assertions of communism made by many Third World rebel groups during the Cold War to garner Soviet support.

Moreover, while it is true that the overall Chechen society has maintained its traditions, it is undeniable that the clan system is facing a crisis and that, in Anatol Lieven's words, a growing number of young Chechens perceive radical Islam as, "the only discipline that can hold their society together."[72] The sense of frustration and desperation that fifteen years of savage war has brought upon the Chechens has been exploited by a few extremists. Today, a growing number of young Chechen men and women turn to fundamentalism. Russian brutality also played a key role in this process and an analysis of the evolution of the conflict shows that the sacralization of the Chechen conflict was "a reaction to conditions rather than a cause."[73] More than ten years ago, even Dudayev foresaw the sacralization of the conflict due to Russia's blind policies, stating that, "Russia…has forced us to take the Islamic path."[74] What can be defined as a mixture of ethnic and criminal insurgency has increasingly taken a deeply ideological bent, losing its former secular characteristics.[75] While the ethnonationalism that motivated and united Chechen clans during the 1990s is still important among most Chechens, the majority of the forces fighting on the ground today have replaced clan ties with a visceral form of religious fundamentalism that is foreign to Chechen tradition.

Given these premises, the future of the conflict looks grim. In the post-9/11 world, the Chechen *mujahideen* have been increasingly linked to al-Qaeda. Furthermore, Moscow's claim that Chechnya is just one of the battles waged by Bin Laden against the West has now been (somehow reluctantly) accepted by the United States. While the links to al-Qaeda are undeniable, equating the conflict with Bin Laden's global *jihad* denies justice to the legitimate claims of the Chechens and gives the Russians virtual *carte blanche* in dealing with all forces on the ground, Wahhabis and Chechen nationalists alike.

The death of Maskhadov, killed under mysterious circumstances in March 2005, was hailed by Russian authorities as an important success. Nevertheless, Maskhadov might have been Moscow's last hope for a negotiated solution in Chechnya. Despite his undeniable flaws, Maskhadov, the former president of Ichkeria, was the last Chechen leader with a secular view who had retained significant military power and national prestige. In 2004, the nationalist and secular forces controlled by Maskhadov represented roughly one third of the entire Chechen movement.[76] But with the commander's death, Wahhabi militants have now gained virtually unchallenged prominence. In fact, immediately after Maskhadov's death, Basayev announced that the new president of Ichkeria was the little-known Islamic scholar Abdul Khalim Sadulaev, at the time head of the Wahhabi-instituted Supreme Shariah Court.[77] Non-Wahhabi forces led by commanders such as Doku Umarov, a traditional Sufi who has repeatedly condemned Wahhabi terrorism, have indeed continued to fight tenaciously. Many believe that with Maskhadov's death the real power rests more solidly in the hands of Basayev and other Wahhabi fighters, making peace in Chechnya a distant dream.

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[1] Yo'av Karny, "Undying Enmity; The Chechen Leaders Thrive On Perpetual, Idealized War," *Washington Post*, October 10, 1999.
[2] On the limited military role of the Arabs in Afghanistan, see for example Gilles Kepel, *Jihad; the Trail of Political Islam,* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002. 147-8.
[3] Yavus Akhmadov, Stephen R. Bowers, Marion T. Doss Jr., "Islam in the North Caucasus." *The Journal of Social, Political, and Economic Studies*; Fall 2001; Volume 26, Number 3. 577.
[4] Profile of Ibn ul Khattab, Azzam Publications, August 1999. Khattab's real name is Samir Salih Abdallah al Suwaylim and he was born in Saudi Arabia in 1970.
[5] For the involvement of al Qaeda and BIF in Chechnya, see the "Government Evidentiary Proffer Supporting the Admissibility of Co-conspirator Statements," in *United States of America v. Enaam M. Arnout*, U.S. District Court, Northern District of Illinois, Eastern Division, 02-CR-892 (N. D. Ill. filed Jan. 6, 2003).
[6] John B. Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya. Roots of a Separatist Conflict*, Cambridge, UK; Cambridge University Press, 1998. 92-95.
[7] Confirming Dudayev's lack of "Islamist tendencies," reports indicate that Dudayev commanded Soviet forces in the war in Afghanistan, taking parts in bombing campaigns against fellow Muslims in western Afghanistan. See Dunlop, "Russia Confronts Chechnya. Roots of a Separatist Conflict." 97.
[8] "Life and Times of Ibn ul Khattab," documentary released by the Ansaar News Agency, Birmingham, UK, 2002.
[9] *Life and Times of Ibn ul Khattab*, documentary by the Ansaar News Agency, Birmingham, UK, 2002.
[10] Paul J. Murphy, *The Wolves of Islam: Russia and the Faces of Chechen Terror*, Washington, D.C.; Brassey's Inc., 2004. 39.
[11] "Life and Times of Ibn ul Khattab," documentary released by the Ansaar News Agency, Birmingham, UK, 2002.
[12] Dimitri V. Trenin and Aleksei Malashenko with Anatol Lieven, *Russia's Restless Frontier. The Chechnya Factor in Post-Soviet Russia,* Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2004. 94.
[13] A famous Islamist scholar that contributed to the indoctrination of the trainees in the Chechen camps was Yusuf al Ayiri. Al Ayiri worked closely with Khattab and published several *fatwas* and writing on the situation in Chechnya even after Khattab's death (including the writing "The Theatre Operation in Moscow. What have the Mujahidin Benefited from it?"). Al Ayri was killed by Saudi security forces in Riyadh in May 2003.
[14] Dimitri V. Trenin and Aleksei Malashenko with Anatol Lieven, *Russia's Restless Frontier. The Chechnya Factor in Post-Soviet Russia,* Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2004. 95.
[15] Paul J. Murphy, *The Wolves of Islam: Russia and the Faces of Chechen Terror*, Washington, D.C.; Brassey's Inc., 2004. 41.
[16] Murad al Shishani, "Portrait of a Chechen Mujahid Leader," *Terrorism Monitor*, The Jamestown Foundation, Volume 2, Issue 8 (April 23, 2004). Al Seif is widely respected among Islamist circles as a scholar and theorist, and his writings on the legitimacy of suicide bombings have had wide circulation.
[17] Mayrbek Vachagaev, "Evolution of the Chechen Djamaat," *The Jamestown Foundation*, April 6, 2005. http://www.jamestown.org/publications_details.php?volume_id=409&issue_id=3291&article_id=2369561
[18] Paul J. Murphy. The Wolves of Islam: Russia and the Faces of Chechen Terror. Washington, D.C.; Brassey's Inc., 2004. 41.
[19] According to Murphy, the bond between the two was solidified by the "adoption" of Khattab as a son by Basayev's parents, a necessary step to make foreigners acceptable to Chechen society. See Murphy, 90.
[20] Yavus Akhmadov, Stephen R. Bowers, Marion T. Doss Jr.. "Islam in the North Caucasus," *The Journal of Social, Political, and Economic Studies*; Fall 2001; Volume 26, Number 3. 578.
[21] Yavus Akhmadov, Stephen R. Bowers, Marion T. Doss Jr.. "Islam in the North Caucasus," *The Journal of Social, Political, and Economic Studies*; Fall 2001; Volume 26, Number 3. 578.
[22] Paul J. Murphy, *The Wolves of Islam: Russia and the Faces of Chechen Terror*, Washington, D.C.; Brassey's Inc., 2004. 43.
[23] Anatol Lieven, *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power,* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998. 317.

[24] Matthew Evangelista, *The Chechen Wars: Will Russia Go the Way of the Soviet Union?* Washington D.C., The Brookings Institution, 2002. 93.
[25] Yavus Akhmadov, Stephen R. Bowers, Marion T. Doss Jr.. "Islam in the North Caucasus," *The Journal of Social, Political, and Economic Studies*; Fall 2001; Volume 26, Number 3.
[26] Matthew Evangelista. *The Chechen Wars: Will Russia Go the Way of the Soviet Union?* Washington D.C., The Brookings Institution, 2002. 92.
[27] "The Dynamics of Dagestan," *Financial Times Asia Intelligence Wire*, August 24, 1999.
[28] Sharon LaFraniere, "How Jihad Made its way to Chechnya; Secular Separatist Movement Transformed by Militant Vanguard," *Washington Post,* April 26, 2003.
[29] Paul J. Murphy, *The Wolves of Islam: Russia and the Faces of Chechen Terror*, Washington, D.C.; Brassey's Inc., 2004. 45.
[30] Sharon LaFraniere, "How Jihad Made its way to Chechnya; Secular Separatist Movement Transformed by Militant Vanguard," *Washington Post*, April 26, 2003.
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[32] Yo'av Karny, *Highlanders: A Journey to the Caucasus,* New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giraux, 2000. 258-9.
[33] Dimitri V. Trenin, Aleksei V. Malashenko with Anatol Lievenm, *Russia's Restless Frontier. The Chechnya Factor in Post-Soviet Russia*, Washington D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2004. 34.
[34] Paul J. Murphy, *The Wolves of Islam: Russia and the Faces of Chechen Terror*, Washington, D.C.; Brassey's Inc., 2004. 45-6.
[35] "Security of CIS Threatened by Religious Extremism," *Segodnia*, June 5, 1998.
[36] The exact number of Muslims in the Russian Federation is debated. See Alexei Malashenko, "The Islamic Factor in Russia," *New Europe Review*, November 2004.
[37] Anatol Lieven, "Nightmare in the Caucasus," *Washington Quarterly*, Winter 2000, 23:1. 145.
[38] Nabi Abdullaev, "Nadir and Magomed Khachilaev: Politicians for the New Russia," *The Jamestown Foundation, PRISM*, Volume 5, Issue 18. October 22, 1999.
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[40] Paul J. Murphy, *The Wolves of Islam: Russia and the Faces of Chechen Terror*, Washington, D.C.; Brassey's Inc., 2004. 92.
[41] Paul J. Murphy, *The Wolves of Islam: Russia and the Faces of Chechen Terror*, Washington, D.C.; Brassey's Inc., 2004. 99.
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[43] Paul J. Murphy, *The Wolves of Islam: Russia and the Faces of Chechen Terror*, Washington, D.C.; Brassey's Inc., 2004. 99.
[44] Dimitri V. Trenin and Aleksei Malashenko with Anatol Lieven, *Russia's Restless Frontier. The Chechnya Factor in Post-Soviet Russia,* Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2004. 82.
[45] Paul J. Murphy, *The Wolves of Islam: Russia and the Faces of Chechen Terror*, Washington, D.C.; Brassey's Inc., 2004. 99.
[46] Matthew Evangelista, *The Chechen Wars: Will Russia Go the Way of the Soviet Union?* Washington D.C., The Brookings Institution, 2002. 67.
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[48] Anatol Lieven, *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power,* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998. 124-5.
[49] Paul J. Murphy, *The Wolves of Islam: Russia and the Faces of Chechen Terror*, Washington, D.C.; Brassey's Inc., 2004. 115.
[50] Mark Kramer, "The Perils of Counterinsurgency; Russia's War in Chechnya," *International Security*, Volume 29, Issue 3 (Winter 2004). 19.
[51] In a 2000 interview with the Islamist website Sawt al Qoqaz (Voice of the Caucasus, www.qoqaz.net) Shamil Basayev confirmed the importance of the teachings of the Arab mujahideen for some Chechen commanders: "We have benefited from studying the Afghan Jihad, particularly after Commanders Khattab, Yaqub al Ghamidi and his deputy Abu Waled al Ghamidi, Abu Jafar al Yemeni, Hakim al Madani

and Abu Bakr Aqeedah (may Allah have mercy upon these two) explained to us the details of what happened in Afghanistan. We studied the various dimensions and developments of their cause and we are knowledgeable about what happened."

[52] Sharon LaFraniere, "How Jihad Made its way to Chechnya; Secular Separatist Movement Transformed by Militant Vanguard," *Washington Post*, April 26, 2003.

[53] Mark Kramer, "The Perils of Counterinsurgency; Russia's War in Chechnya," *International Security*, Volume 29, Issue 3 (Winter 2004). 31.

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[59] Mark Jurgensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God*, Los Angeles & Berkeley, California; University of California Press, 2000. 172.

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[68] Yavus Akhmadov, Stephen R. Bowers, Marion T. Doss Jr.. "Islam in the North Caucasus." *The Journal of Social, Political, and Economic Studies*; Fall 2001; Volume 26, Number 3. 569-73.

[69] Anatol Lieven. *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998. 340.

[70] See for example the message with which Basayev claimed responsibility for the October 2005 operation in Nalchik, which is available at: http://www.kavkazcenter.com/eng/content/2005/10/17/4156.shtml

[71] Dimitri V. Trenin and Aleksei Malashenko with Anatol Lieven, *Russia's Restless Frontier. The Chechnya Factor in Post-Soviet Russia,* Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2004. 73.

[72] Anatol Lieven, *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power,* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998. 302.

[73] Dimitri V. Trenin and Aleksei Malashenko with Anatol Lieven, *Russia's Restless Frontier. The Chechnya Factor in Post-Soviet Russia,* Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2004. 79.

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