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Islam in Ingushetia and Chechnya

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Building on an earlier article entitled *Islam in the North Caucasus,* by Bowers at al., published in Volume 26 (2001) of this journal, the authors analyze the historical evolution of Islamic terrorism in Russia, Chechnya, and more recently Ingushetia.

Key Words: Russia; Chechnya; Ingushetia; Islamization; Christinaity; Terrorism; Wahhahbites; Turkic peoples; North Caucasus.

Introduction

The Islamization of Ingushetia and Chechnya began in the 19th century and, although interrupted by the Soviet experience, has resumed in the Northern Caucasus. Soviet dominance in the region suppressed religion so excessively that by the 1980s Islam existed as little more than a household tradition and a mark of ethnic identity. However, following the relaxation of the Gorbachev years and the subsequent breakdown of the Soviet Union, two basic forms of Islam emerged in the Northern Caucasus. One is regarded as the traditional Islamic faith, whereas the other, Wahhabism, the new, largely politicized form of Islam, is more radical.

The Wahhabites, originally active in Dagestan, later gained popularity in Chechnya and other parts of the Northern Caucasus as the local population, especially in the poor highlands, began to fall into poverty following the collapse of the Soviet economic system. Currently, most Wahhabite or revivalist Muslim groups exist as isolated enclaves. A long history of conflict in the region, combined with radical religious rhetoric,

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suggests Wahhabite youth pose likely candidates for the next generation of guerrilla war leaders, mirroring the ideals of Islamic radicals of the Middle East. It is already difficult for authorities in the region to suppress illegal activity, because the Wahhabite enclaves are often better armed than the local police.

Wahhabism is more accurately referred to as Salafite Islam (from the Arabic *as-salaf,* ancestors), a term used in the Islamic world in reference to r*evivalists* wanting to restore old values. It embraces a more political than religious theological framework, transforming it into a potentially violent force, threatening the stability of the region.

Background

In the Northern Caucasus, almost every social, political and ideological issue has an Islamic component. The Muslim faith has become an inherent part of the regional ethnic identity, permeating the mentality and behavior of peoples living in the region. The northeastern part of the Caucasus, including Dagestan, Chechnya and Ingushetia, has a stronger religious tradition, while the northwestern Caucasus, primarily the Adigei and Turkic people, did not embrace Islam with the same fervor. Additionally, Islam by definition has social and political dimensions. Therefore, the resumption of Islamization is marked by the emergence of Islamic political trends.[4]

The small, nominally autonomous Republic of Ingushetia covers 3600 square kilometers, has a native population of 300,000 and about as many Chechen refugees. The Ingush and neighboring Chechens are ethnically and linguistically similar. However, their religious cultures vary. The Ingush embraced Islam later and with less intensity than the Chechens. Also, unlike Chechnya, there is no tradition of militant Islam in Ingushetia – a factor that has been favorable in relations with Russians.[5]

Ingushetia is experiencing a revival of religiosity and boasts over 400 mosques, most constructed in recent years. More than 1,000 Ingush

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[4]Akhmet Yarlykapov, "Islamic Fundamentalism in the Northern Caucasus: Towards a Formulation of The Problem", *Caucasian Regional Studies*, Volume 4, Issue 1, 1999.

[5]Anatol Lieven, *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 100

receive a religious education each year, either in Ingushetia or abroad. The Muftia Albogachiev, who maintains good relations with neighboring republics, directs spiritual leadership. The Ingush, like most Chechens, are Muslim-Sunis. Yet, unlike in Chechnya, the spiritual leaders of Ingushetia do not claim direct participation in the state governance and have not demanded the introduction of Shariat law.

Typically, the Ingush are associated with one of the two traditional orders of Islam. The Naqshbandi order is represented in Ingushetia by the brotherhood of Deni Arsanov, a highly respected figure whose descendants are held in equally high regard. The son of Sheikh Ilias Arsanov left Chechnya in 1996 because of conflicts with Ichkeria authorities and is currently residing in Ingushetia.

The Qadiri order in Ingushetia is primarily associated with Kunta-Hadji Kishiev and has close relations with its members' co-religionists in Chechnya. In the nineteenth century the brotherhood of Batal-Hadji appeared in the Ingush village of Surhahi. Members of this brotherhood strictly observe their Charter. They are well disciplined and united under the leadership of the descendants of Batal-Hadji.

Learning from the tragic example of Chechnya, which suffered so much from religious disputes, the Ingush Muslims have managed to resist ideological and dogmatic extremism. The Ministry of Internal Affairs of Ingushetia was given responsibility for the suppression of Wahhabism and in 1998 it was formally banned in Ingushetia. Wahhab emissaries were expelled and theological schools allied with them were closed. Furthermore, though Chechen rebel groups have attempted to use Ingushetia as a sanctuary while planning military strategy against Russian forces, Ingush security forces have been deployed to drive out the Chechens and those suspected of supporting them.[6]

Although some young Ingush citizens, motivated by a sense of religious obligation, participated in military activities during the first Chechen war, they avoided involvement during the second conflict. Their opposition to the second war was a result of their rejection of Wahhabism and the slave-trade often associated with it. Chechen

[6]Allenova, Olga and Marina Oborina (Translation). "Russia: Slaves of Shari'ah." 30 March 2000

Wahhabites were considered expert hostage-takers, using Urus-Martan as their center for trade. Hostages were divided according to wealthy and expensive or poor and cheap. Soldiers were categorized as cheap and therefore enslaved. Prisoners were often tortured, and were the subjects of knife-throwing target practice for their captors. Islamic conversion was encouraged as a means to spare oneself, though the kidnappers did not always keep their promise.[7] Many Ingush families suffered from Wahhabite enslavement.

Regional turbulence continues to affect Ingushetia's development and represents a significant threat to the republic's stability. In 2004, Ingushetian President Murat M. Zyazikov, a former KGB officer regarded as a close ally of Russian President Vladimir Putin, was the target of an assassination attempt by a suicide bomber who drove a car into the president's armored Mercedes on a highway near Magas, the capital of Ingushetia. The powerful explosion killed one of his guards, but the president received only minor injuries.[8]

Northern Ossetia, Kabardin-Balkaria, Karachayevo-Cherkessia, and Adygeiya are located in the central and northern-west regions of the North Caucasus, where the population adheres to the ethical norms of mountaineers, not to religious values. Unofficial Sufi brotherhoods never played a significant role in this region. By the 1970s religious traditions such as circumcision, having a mullah's blessing for all marriages, and others had been eliminated.

In the 1990s, a new phenomenon of spiritual life related to interest in Muslim values and the great past appeared in the national republics of the Central and Northern-West Caucasus. Religious governance headed by muftis was introduced throughout the region and Islamic educational institutions, including higher educational facilities, were opened. Most were created with encouragement and funding from abroad. Mosques were restored in almost all the communities of Balkaria, Cherkessia, and Ossetia. Eight mosques were opened in Karachayevo-Cherkessia, even though the Muslims account for only half

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[7]Steven Lee Myers, "Ingushetia: Leader of Small Russian Republic Escapes Assassination," Interfax, 6 April 2004.

[8] Ibid.

of the total population. The remaining half embraces Orthodox Christianity.

Islamization in these republics occurred as radical Islamic organizations worked to fill the vacuum created by the disappearance of Communist ideology. The Daavat groups popularized Wahhabism and recruited youth from the mountain regions into military groups. From 1996 to 1999 dozens of young people from Balkaria and Karachay were trained in camps near Sejen-Yurt and were active participants during the first Chechen war. These camps were run by a young Saudi Arabian named Samir Saleh Abdullah Al-Suwailem, but better known as Ibn-ul-Khattab. Khattab, who joined the fighting in Afghanistan when he was only seventeen, had been an associate of Osama bin Laden and Taliban leader Mullah Omar.

Resumed Islamization has become a fact of life in the entire North Caucasus region. Islam is regaining status primarily among the peoples who suffered from deportation during World War II, especially among Balkars and Karachayevos. Many elements of Sufi practice have been restored in the communities populated by those who have returned from internal exile.

The hostility of traditional believers toward the Wahhabites has grown stronger because the Wahhabites, who perceive only their traditions as legitimate, do not recognize the customs and traditions of the mountaineers. In Kabardin-Balkaria, the fight against Wahhabism has been determined and often bitter. Authorities eliminated the most ardent armed extremists and expelled or disbanded a number of suspicious organizations financed from abroad.

There are about 2000 Wahhabites in Karachay, including Muslim radicals who have not formally embraced the Wahhabite faith. However, it was Karachay Wahhabites who were recruited to commit terrorist acts in Moscow and Volgodonsk.

Leaders of Christian Orthodox and Muslim communities deny there has been a religious intrusion into the North Caucasus. This denial is presented as an explanation of why the Russian Orthodox Church did not give a special blessing to either the first or the second Chechen war. While the Orthodox Church disapproves of civilian mistreatment, it has taken no official public position.

Wahhabism and the Chechen Conflict

The impact of religion on conflict in the North Caucasus is most notable in Chechnya. In contemporary Chechnya, as noted above, traditional Islam is challenged by Wahhabism. Named after its founder Al-Wahhab, the Wahhabite movement emerged in the eighteenth century. Wahhab claimed Islam had become distorted and called upon his followers to purify it and return to Islam's fundamentals. Now Wahhabism appears throughout the Middle East, particularly Saudi Arabia, where it is accepted as the official ideology of the royal family. However, Wahhabism in Chechnya (as well as in Tajikistan), does not relate directly to Wahhabism as it is understood by Sunni Muslims in the Middle Eastern countries. Although the main idea is the same – the purification of Islam from both pagan and modern influences – Chechen Wahhabism has characteristics that distinguish it from the religious values and practices of Saudi Arabia.

The Wahhabite movement has deep implications for Chechnya's religious, social and political life. Its call to purify Islam challenges Chechnya's traditional Islam, which is heavily influenced by the local system of beliefs and norms, and by an elaborate structure of religious communities and brotherhoods. In fact, Wahhabism attempts to return the population to what it views as original Islam, rejecting Chechnya's unique historical experience. Crucial to this transformation is the application of rules, norms and practices accepted among the radicals in the Middle East to Chechen social and political life. Hence, traditionalists (who constitute the overwhelming majority of the population) associate Wahhabism with foreign influences that threaten their religious customs and identity.[9] For their part, the Wahhabites view the supporters of traditional Islam as backward sectarians who have distorted the Islamic faith. Since the early 1990s, both the conflict between fundamentalists and traditionalists, and significant divisions among Sufi sects, have had a profound impact on Chechen politics and

[9] Everything about the history of Wahhabism supports this perception. From the very first days of Wahhabism, this Muslim tendency was supported by the Saudi rulers who used force to propagate this faith. They eventually moved toward the East and challenged the Ottoman Empire.

the on-going Russian military operations in the region.

During the 1994-1996 military operation, Russian federal troops were a common enemy for most Sufi brotherhoods and Wahhabites. Both mobilized the population against the federal government and temporarily put aside their differences. Most Chechen leaders identified themselves with Sufi brotherhoods to secure the support of their members; for example, President Dudayev declared that he belonged to the Kunta-Hadji brotherhood. In this wartime environment, the Wahhabites managed to strengthen their position in Chechnya. Money, armament and fighters provided by radical counterparts from abroad were crucial to the Chechen resistance against the Russian federal troops and enabled Wahhabites to become an influential group in the republic. Relations between Sufi brotherhoods and Wahhabites deteriorated dramatically after the end of the 1994-1996 campaign, and their religious differences spilled over into politics.

In the political realm, traditionalists and fundamentalists disagreed over the organization and Russian policy of the Chechen state. Sufi Muslims advocated a secular state that would preserve Chechnya's traditional social structure and its unique Islamic culture. Their position on the future of Russian-Chechen relations was not uniform, and ranged from calls for independence to the development of a special status within the Russian Federation. There is no evidence that Sufi brotherhoods had any interest in protracting the conflict or extending it beyond Chechnya's borders. Wahhabites were determined to build a pure Muslim society that would be organized and regulated according to the Shariat law (as opposed to *adat* – traditional norms developed in Chechnya before the adoption of Islam). A Just (fair) Islamic order, as they believe existed in the times of the Arabic caliphate, became Chechnya's religious extremists' goal. Furthermore, they aimed to create a larger Islamic state in the Northern Caucasus to encompass Dagestan, Ingushetia and possibly other Russian regions. Since those regions chose to stay in the Federation and their predominantly Muslim population did not sympathize with fundamentalism, the only means of achieving this objective was aggression against Russia and a declaration of *gazavat* (or jihad) – holy war – against non-believers. In Dagestan in the early 1990s, the population rejected the ideals of Wahhabism and the

leadership declared it "undesirable" in the republic. In June 2000, an act of the Dagestan parliament banned all Wahhabite organizations.

Thus, Wahhabites challenged the official Chechen leadership (President Aslan Maskhadov and his supporters) and emerged as a serious threat to the foundations of Chechen society. As a result, officials in Grozny became more and more critical of Wahhabism in their statements and declarations. However, Maskhadov took no decisive action, fearing it might exacerbate the situation in the republic. Violent confrontation between traditionalists and radicals occurred when Wahhabites clashed with Sufi Muslims in May 1998 in Gudermes and Urus-Martan and again in Gudermes in July 1998, when approximately 50 people were killed in one day's fighting. Fearing fundamentalists would destabilize the situation in the republic and attempt to rebel against Grozny, Maskhadov declared a state of emergency, dissolved and disarmed the Shariat Guards and Islamic regiment, and exiled the especially troublesome and violent Ibn-ul-Khattab.[10] On July 23, 1998, there was an assassination attempt on Maskhadov in Grozny, believed to have been organized by Wahhabites. Observers in Russia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan, all of whom were directly affected by this instability, agreed the republic was on the brink of civil war.

Despite a relatively strong position, Wahhabites were not able to assert their influence throughout the republic, much less impose their ideology on its entire territory. However, they went ahead with their plans to occupy neighboring Russian regions and invaded Dagestan in August 1999. Although members of Sufi brotherhoods may have participated in the invasion, the Russian government blamed Wahhabites for conceptualizing and implementing it. Khattab, a person widely identified with the Islamic militants, encouraged rebel leader Shamil Basayev to send a battalion of Chechen fundamentalists into Dagestan.[11] Subsequent investigations, and pleas of innocence on the part of Grozny officials who condemned the aggression in Dagestan, further convinced Moscow that fundamentalists had begun a jihad that was resulting in a loss of control over the situation in Chechnya. Russian

[10] Khattab died in March, 2002, as a result of poison that was placed in a letter sent to him.

[11] Ruslan Mahmedov and Cali Ruchala, *Sobaka*, July 22, 2002.

authorities viewed the Wahhabites as a major threat to (1) the peace and stability of the Northern Caucasus and (2) to the territorial integrity of the Russian Federation. The invasion of Dagestan and the Wahhabite plan to wage a holy war against Russia until a "purely" Islamic state was created in the southern territories prompted the federal government to begin a military operation in Chechnya immediately following the defeat of those who attacked Dagestan.

As federal troops advanced into Chechnya, however, they had to fight not only Islamic extremists, but some members of Sufi brotherhoods who for various reasons, as in 1994-1996, opposed Russian control. Unlike fundamentalists, Sufi Muslims do not fight for a religious cause and tend to have more reasonable positions on issues. Their dissatisfaction with the situation in the republic from 1996-1999 led them to cooperate with the Russians in a number of instances. As a result, many of the Sufi communities negotiated with the federal representatives and avoided armed conflict. Some openly supported the military operation and organized volunteer troops to fight on the Russian side against both Sufi and Wahhabite rebels.

Therefore, Sufi communities' opposition to the Russians or Wahhabites depends on traditions, history, kinship, religious idiosyncrasies and even geographic position. The population in the mountains is generally perceived as very militant and hostile even to fellow Chechens from the flatland, whereas the northern part of the republic has been loyal to Moscow.

On the other hand, Wahhabites are almost by definition inclined to resist Russian military operations and the subsequent restoration of peaceful life and order. Therefore, the Russian government, the military and the population at large views Wahhabites and any other radical Islamic movement as the greatest obstacle to the stabilization of Chechnya. When they choose to cooperate, traditional Sufi groups are Moscow's most valuable partners in the struggle against extremism. Accordingly, the federal government strives to support traditional Chechen institutions: teips, tukhums, virds and tarikats. Russian officials hope that they will help prevent the spread of extremism and facilitate a return to normal life.

The Wahhabite Perspective

Chechen society has a complex structure and is fragmented along the lines of kinship and religious identification. Several basics can be summarized. First, all politics are local and driven by narrowly-defined interests of clans or brotherhoods. A nationwide movement, whether pro-Russian or anti-Russian, is not likely to emerge as long as the present tendencies persist. The roots of and the solutions for the Chechen crisis lie in interactions among different factions of society, not in national interests or aspirations of any one ethnic group. Second, Sufi brotherhoods play an important role in mobilizing public support for or against the central government or any other authority; their decisions and actions are best explained individually. Third, religious extremism does exist in Chechnya and for various reasons is accepted among a certain portion of the population. It calls for the redesign of Chechen society in accordance with the principles of fundamentalist Islam and the conquest of neighboring lands, thus antagonizing traditionalists within Chechnya and the federal government. The confrontation between Chechens and the Sufi Muslims has been one of the most dramatic aspects of the Chechen crisis. Fourth, Wahhabite violence, and the events in Daghestan, prompted the federal government's military response. Fifth, since Wahhabites are currently the greatest threat to Moscow's interests, the federal government has supported traditional Chechen institutions, including religious brotherhoods, with the assumption they will effectively resist foreign radicals, though they often deny Russian authority as well.

Mr. Albert Avduev, a member of the Chechen diaspora who until recently worked in Moldova as an oil engineer, has lectured on the Wahhabite perspective. Avduev is a former member of the Chechen parliament who privately describes himself as a secret Wahhabite but who is very open in his efforts to promote a better understanding of the principles of those people who wish to cleanse Islam of its alien characteristics.[12]

Avduev prefers not to use the term Wahhabite, insisting the term itself is a result of Russian propaganda. He maintains that Russian

[12] Interviews with Albert Avdeuv, Chishinau, Moldova, October, 2000.

historians have distorted both Islam and the movement that seeks to reform Islamic practice. For Avduev, Russian colonization led to a situation in which both the Islamic faith and Islamic society were corrupted. The flight of Russian serfs from the restrictive Czarist administrators was a significant factor that enabled Russians to penetrate the Caucasus as well as other portions of southern Russia.

Avduev explains this process of distortion as one driven by extreme Russian prejudice against all people of the North Caucasus, Chechens in particular. The Russian mass media, he argues, have long presented the Caucasus people as being more like orangutans than humans. Russia's aversion to the people of Chechnya and Daghestan led to a deliberate policy of genocide as early as the nineteenth century. Religious traitors and Russians, he maintains, worked to distort the true Islamic faith. According to Avduev, a holy war against non-believers was the only option for devout Muslims. With the weakening of Communist rule, the true believers of the North Caucasus were able to work to restore their legitimate rights. Russian authorities, Avduev insists, have undertaken a renewed genocidal campaign to prevent the restoration of a true Islamic society in the North Caucasus.[13]

Conclusion

Although Islam has been instrumental in the development of the North Caucasus region, the peoples living there do not identify with any single sect or doctrine. Historically, the Islam of this region was suffused with many pre-Islamic customs and traditions. The North Caucasian federation forged by Shamil, Imam of Daghestan, waged a holy war (ghazavat) against the old ways in order to impose Islamic law throughout the Imanate and against the Russian Empire, and also in order to preserve its independence. Shamil, a Sufi of the Naqshbandi order, demanded great sacrifices from his peoples but was eventually conquered by the Russians.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, another Sufi order took root in the North Caucasus. This was the more pacifistic Qadiri order founded by Kunta-Hadj. The Qadiri participated along with the

[13] Ibid.

Naqshbandi in various insurrections during the twilight of the Russian Empire and throughout the Soviet period. By the time Chechnya unilaterally declared its independence in 1991, the Qadiri rite had become the dominant form of Sufism in Chechnya.

During the last decade, the fundamentalist Wahhabite movement, which enthusiastically supports Chechen independence, has become a major regional force despite numerous efforts by the Qadiri Chechens to suppress its influence. This official suppression has resulted in the emergence of a clandestine Wahhabite network supported from abroad, particularly from the Middle East and Afghanistan. Increased foreign influence was dramatically revealed when Chechen rebels seized a Moscow theater in October 2002. An Arabic language banner heralded the Chechens' demands and Chechen women dressed in the manner of Arabic women. This shocking scene underscored the increasingly widespread assumption that Islamic terrorism had replaced the Chechens long-standing demands for independence from Russian authority.[14]

The Chechen diaspora, which has played a major supporting role in the modern Middle East, especially in the former Ottoman Empire and successor states such as Iraq and Jordan, has provided aid and soldiers to support their Chechen cousins. The money, armaments, and soldiers (mujahideen) provided by various radical Islamic groups from abroad have also played a major role in strengthening Chechen resistance.

After the first Chechen war (1994-1996), religious differences between the Sufi movements and the Wahhabites began to have a political impact. While Sufi Muslims called for the creation of a secular state that would preserve traditional social patterns, the Wahhabites demanded a purification of Islam and the eradication of local customs that have tainted and undermined pure Islam.

The Russian Federation was greatly humiliated by its loss of the first Chechen war through the peace brokered by General Alexander Lebed in 1996. Many important politicians and military officers longed for an opportunity to avenge this loss and regain national honor. The

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[14] Stephen Blank, "The Chechen Theater of War", *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, November 6, 2002.

Wahhabite effort to spread a pan-Islamic fundamentalist revival by invading Dagestan in 1999 gave Russia the opportunity it sought to redeem itself militarily.

Within Chechnya, a divided people are confronted by two polar choices: either to work within the Russian Federation and survive physically or to sacrifice the nation upon the altar of jihad. Other Caucasian peoples (Circassians, Balkars, Ingush, Avars and Kumyks, among others) have opted to stay within the Russian Federation. Only the Chechens seem unable to resolve their differences in favor of coexistence.