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From “Secessionist Rebels” to “Al-Qaeda Shock Brigades”: Assessing Russia’s Efforts to Extend the Post-September 11th War on Terror to Chechnya

BRIAN GLYN WILLIAMS

“Today Russians and Americans have a common, insidious and ever-present enemy. Its name is ‘international terrorism.’”

Sergei Yastrzhembsky, Kremlin Spokesman

Background: Russia, Chechnya, and the West on the Eve of September 11th.

For tens of thousands of Russian Federation soldiers serving in the breakaway province of Chechnya, September 11 2001 was like any other day. Russian armored personnel carriers wound their way through Chechnya’s southern mountains running a gauntlet of rocket propelled grenade attacks and remote controlled land mine ambushes that often sent them up in balls of fire. Flights of armor-plated helicopter gunships strafed Caucasus Mountain hideouts and forested trails suspected of offering sanctuary to elusive Chechen rebels. As on any other day, frightened, trigger-happy Russian conscripts manned *blokpusty* (checkpoints) in the northern Chechen lowlands, harassing and summarily arresting Chechen civilians bold enough to travel the republic’s main arteries.

In response, embittered young Chechen men who had lost friends or loved ones in Russian *zachistky* (cleansing) operations took up their *Kalashnikov* rifles and slipped into the forested mountains to kill Russians. Once in the rebel-dominated southern highlands these young men declared *kanlis* (ancient Caucasian blood feuds) on the Russian Federal forces. Inevitably, some of these armed *boyeviks* (guerrilla fighters) went on to join the well-funded Arab *jibadi* volunteer warriors who had come from the Middle East to assist the outgunned Chechen Muslims in their uneven struggle against the mighty Russian *kafirs* (Orthodox Christian “infidels”). As on any other day, countries of the West seemed only mildly concerned by the fact that the horrors of Bosnia and Kosovo were being perpetuated in a far off *terra incognita* that hardly seemed to belong to twenty-first

century Europe.

For those in the Kremlin who had led the Russian people into a conflict known in military circles as CW2 (the Second Russo-Chechen conflict of October 1999-present), it was business as usual in the slow blood drip that Russian President Vladimir Putin glibly painted as “a war on international terrorism.”¹ Despite Moscow’s avowed goal of fighting “international Islamic extremism” in the breakaway republic of Chechnya, most Westerners were agnostic at best when it came to the Kremlin’s sweeping allegations that its Muslim highlander foes were “terrorists.” While most in the West were only vaguely aware of the Chechens, those who were informed of events in the Caucasus should have felt hypocritical about preventing genocide at the hands of the Serbian ethnic cleansers in the Balkans while ignoring a more devastating case of ethnocide in Chechnya.

In addition to moral qualms, anyone familiar with the Chechen people could tell you that the vodka-swilling Chechens had little in common with the *Wahhabi* Arab militants who had joined Abdullah Azzam and Osama bin Laden’s transnational brotherhood of holy warriors during the Soviet-Afghan conflict (1979-1988).² Despite Putin’s claims to be fighting terrorism in Chechnya, most analysts agreed that the Sovietized Chechen *Sufis* had little in common with the stereotypical images many Westerners associated with Middle Eastern Islamic fanaticism/terrorism. Having been brutally conquered by Tsarist Russia in 1861 and enclosed behind the confines of the Communist Iron Curtain since 1917, the Chechens had long been cut off from the rest of the *Dar al Islam* (Realm of Islam) and hardly resembled Arab Mus-

lims from the conservative Middle East.

Knowledgeable voices also stressed that the moderate Chechens had elected a secular pragmatist, Aslan Maskhadov, as president after winning *de facto* independence from Russia in the first Russo-Chechen War of 1994-96. The Chechen separatist movement had in fact been forged by a Russified secular nationalist-separatist, General Djohar Dudayev. Dudayev had previously served as a Soviet air force general fighting *against* Osama bin Laden and other Islamic *mujahideen* (holy warriors) in Afghanistan.

In addition, human rights organizations (both Russian groups, such as *Memorial*, and Western groups, such as *Human Rights Watch*) routinely accused Russian Federation Forces of carrying out crimes against humanity in their campaign to bludgeon the Chechen separatist guerrillas into submission, including executions of bound Chechens, whose mutilated bodies were found in mass graves.³ With 100,000 underpaid conscript troops stationed in the lands of a highlander people that had humiliated the Russian army in the first Russo-Chechen War, it was perhaps foreseeable that war crimes, retaliatory massacres, and extra-judicial killings would be carried out by undisciplined Russian forces during the second round of warfare in Chechnya.⁴ The Dresdenesque scale of destruction leveled on the Chechen capital of Grozny, however, stunned even those acquainted with the excesses of twentieth century warfare. By the summer of 2000 the level of utter devastation visited upon Grozny by Russian Scud surface-to-surface ballistic missiles, thermobaric aerial bombardments, and aerosol artillery shelling could hardly be kept a secret from the outside world.⁵

The devastation in Grozny was so systematic and extensive that one could actually see the carnage resulting from the Russians' deployment of weapons of mass destruction from outer space.⁶ A comparison of photographs taken by satellites before and after the September-December 1999 tactical obliteration of Grozny revealed the fact that a European city of over 400,000 (roughly the size of Edinburgh, Scotland or Little Rock, Arkansas) had been literally wiped off the face of the earth. While Western politicians hardly identified with the goals of the Chechen separatists (even Cold Warriors from the Reagan and Bush Sr. administration recognized Russia's right to defend its territorial integrity), most were critical of the senselessly brutal second war in Chechnya.

In 1999, U. S. Republican presidential candidate George W. Bush, for example, categorically condemned Russia's brutal campaign in Chechnya and threatened to cut off IMF and Export-Import Bank loans to Russia as part of a new hard-line policy towards the Kremlin. Of the conflict, candidate Bush said "they [the Russians] need to resolve the dispute peaceably and not be

bombing women and children and causing huge numbers of refugees to flee Chechnya."⁷ Right wing hawks in the United States, such as Senator Jesse Helms, the powerful head of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, also called for punitive sanctions against Russia, including her expulsion from the Group of Eight.

Criticism of Russia was hardly the monopoly of Republicans in the U. S. In its final years, the Clinton administration increasingly came to see the Russo-Chechen conflict in a negative light and tried to have OSCE representatives, Red Cross workers, and U. N. inspectors placed in Chechnya in an effort to curb Russian abuses. The comments of Zbigniew Brzezinski, Democratic President Jimmy Carter's influential National Security Advisor, on the Russo-Chechen conflict are particularly striking considering the post-September 11th demonization of the Chechens as Al Qaeda terrorists. Brzezinski tellingly stated, "What should be done? To start with the US should not fall for Russia's entreaty that 'we are allies against Osama bin Laden'... Terrorism is neither the geopolitical nor moral challenge here [in Chechnya]."⁸

Prior to Al Qaeda's attack on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, few in the West subscribed to the Kremlin's rhetoric equating the Chechen separatists with Al Qaeda terrorists. Most recognized that the predominately-Arab Al Qaeda "organization" had a different agenda from the Chechen insurgents. The American "Crusaders" and the "Zionist-entity" were hardly the enemies of the Chechen highlander insurgents, who were engaged in a localized conflict against a historic enemy.

The Kremlin's leaders, however, were increasingly convinced that there were links between their ethnic Chechen adversaries and the little-understood network of Islamic terrorists that had found an *Al Qaeda al Subah* (Solid Base) in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. Russia's leaders, with some justification, clearly saw the existence of an unstable Chechen "mafiaocracy" on their southern flank as a clear and present danger to their national security. As the Kremlin hyped the threat of the Taliban host regime and its Al Qaeda guests to the security of Russia and its Central Asian neighbors, the second Russo-Chechen war was depicted in the Russian media as a war against the threat of "Islamic terrorism," not as a struggle against the Chechens, who had earlier been labeled "illegal separatist bandit formations."⁹ Russia's new leader, Vladimir Putin, actually owed his meteoric rise to the presidency in 1999-2000 to his bold promise to the Russian people to clean out the "shit house" of Chechnya. On the eve of 9/11, crushing Muslim "terrorists" in Chechnya clearly appealed to the Russian public's increasingly nationalistic mood.¹⁰

Putin's fate, like that of the Russian High Command itself, was therefore intimately linked to the success or

failure of Russian military operations against a terrorist network said to have infiltrated Chechnya from distant Afghanistan. As an element of his campaign to win Western support for Russian "anti-terrorist" operations in the breakaway Chechen Republic, Putin warned the West of a nefarious "arc of Islamic terrorism" stretching across Eurasia, from the deserts of the Taliban-controlled Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan to the northern flank of the Caucasus.¹¹

Throughout 2001 the Kremlin tried, with only limited success, to link its quagmire in Chechnya to the Pash-tun-Taliban theocracy and to the Taliban's guest/patron, Osama bin Laden. As "smoking gun proof" of this connection between their Chechen highlander foes and a Saudi extremist who had declared a global *jihad* against the "Zionists and American Crusaders" in 1998, Kremlin spokesmen pointed to the fact that a Chechen dissident had visited the Taliban in Kabul in January 2000.¹² While the diplomatically isolated Taliban regime's recognition of the encircled "Chechen Republic of Ichkeria" was a purely symbolic gesture, it was depicted by the Kremlin as evidence of a nexus linking its Chechen antagonists to both the fundamentalist Taliban and to bin Laden's Afghan-based transnational terrorist network. In response to the Taliban's recognition of its Chechen adversaries, the Kremlin threatened to bomb Afghanistan with long-range Backfire bombers based in Russia and the former Soviet republics of Central Asia.¹³ In an article in *Izvestiia* dated 25 May 2000, Vladimir Ermolin wrote, "A new internationalist task has appeared for Russia, to destroy global terrorism. Combating them on their own territory, we have declared our readiness to strike the enemy everywhere until we have achieved success. The first international address to be targeted and designated on the war map of the Russian General Staff is Afghanistan, the base of Taliban."¹⁴

As part of its own pre 9/11 "war on terror," the Kremlin stepped up its assistance to a rag-tag band of anti-Taliban holdouts waging a desperate struggle against the Taliban fundamentalists in northern Afghanistan. Known as the Northern Alliance, this eclectic band of fighters made up of horse-mounted ethnic Uzbeks, Shiite Hazaras, and Tajiks, received ammunition, uniforms, helicopters, petrol, and intelligence from the Tajikistan-based Russian 201st Motorized Division.¹⁵ According to Russian military specialist Pavel Felgenhauer, unmarked Russian bombers bombed Taliban positions on several occasions in support of the Northern Alliance, which was headed by the legendary Tajik guerrilla commander, Ahmed Shah Massoud.¹⁶ In this way Russia's generals covertly sought to prevent the spread of Taliban-style fundamentalism into the newly independent buffer states of Central Asia (Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan) by propping up the Northern Alliance as a "shield." In

the ultimate historical irony, the post-Soviet Russian Federation was thus actively supporting its erstwhile Tajik enemy, former anti-Soviet *mujahideen* field commander, Ahmed Shah Massoud the "Lion of Panjshir," in his new capacity as military head of the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance.

While the U. S. had launched its own Tomahawk cruise missile strikes against Osama bin Laden's terrorist training camps in eastern Afghanistan as early as 1998 (in response to Al Qaeda's bombings of the U. S. embassies in Kenya and Mozambique), the Bush administration nevertheless called for Russian restraint in dealing with the Taliban. Although the domestically-focused Bush White House was increasingly aware of the danger posed by the Taliban's transnational terrorist "guests" to America's security (largely as a result of the Al Qaeda bombing of the USS Cole and the failed "Millennium Plot"), Washington did not want to see the Russian Federation use the threat of Muslim militancy emanating from Afghanistan as a pretext for extending its political and military influence into strategically important Central Asia.

For all of their talk of ending the mistrust of the Cold War era, the leaders of Russia and the United States still saw one another as rivals for influence in Eurasia on the eve of September 11th and did not agree on the nature of the Taliban/Al Qaeda threat to Central Eurasia. Washington and Moscow clearly continued to have differences on a variety of issues that were hardly neutralized by their mutual loathing for Al Qaeda and their interests in overcoming the residual animosity of the Cold War.

A major bone of contention between the U. S. and Russian Federation was the burning issue of Chechnya. While the Bush administration had muted its criticism of Russia's brutal war against the Chechens since coming to the White House, many members of the Bush team continued to define the Chechens as Afghan-style *mujahideen* "freedom fighters" engaged in a David versus Goliath struggle against a transcontinental neo-Soviet imperium. Shortly before September 11th, for example, John Beryle, Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, met with Ilyas Akhmadov, the exiled Foreign Minister of Chechnya, in a diplomatic maneuver that demonstrated to the Russian government that Washington did not see the Chechen resistance as a terrorist movement. In a further move that the Russians saw as provocative, National Security Advisor, Condoleezza Rice, tellingly proclaimed "not every Chechen is a terrorist and the Chechens' legitimate aspirations for a political solution should be pursued by the Russian government."¹⁷

As Vladimir Putin and George Bush attended to the vastly different business of running their respective mega-states on the crisp blue morning of September 11th, neither leader could have guessed that their fates

would be bound together by the hijackers of three jets that were about to collide with the symbols of America's economic and military might, the World Trade Centers and the Pentagon. Bin Laden himself could hardly have foreseen the way events would unfold following the deaths of over 3,000 innocents in the U. S. on 9/11. Following Al Qaeda's attack on the U. S., the two Cold War protagonists would forge a strategic alliance that was to have broad global implications for a wide variety of peoples in Eurasia.

Among the first groups to be impacted by this historic realignment was the Chechens. Following Putin's bold decision to wholeheartedly join Bush's "coalition against terror," the Chechen highlanders (who had been fighting the Russians long before the world heard the name Osama bin Laden) would be the first "collateral damage." As the "war on terror" unfolded in previously unforeseen directions, no ethnic group or nation would be as closely linked to Al Qaeda by Western media sources and governments as this Caucasian nation of less than one million persons. The character assassination of Chechens began as the Bush Administration waded into the complexities of Eurasia as part of its wide-ranging military campaign against global Islamic terrorism.

Conflation: Blurring the Chechen Resistance with Osama Bin Laden's Global Terrorist Network

On Sept. 11th 2001, as stunned Russian citizens watched the televised slow-motion collapse of the World Trade Centers in New York, they could not help but compare the attacks on America to the deadly waves of terrorist bombings that had struck their own country in a bloody September in 1999. In that wave of terrorist attacks, Russian apartment complexes were destroyed by two bombings in Moscow, one in Volgograd (southern Russia) and one in Buianaksk (the Russian Caucasian republic of Dagestan which abuts Chechnya), killing approximately 300 Russian civilians. While this unexplained wave of terrorism had been attributed by many Russians to the FSB (largely due to the fact that the FSB, the post-Soviet incarnation of the KGB, had been caught red-handed planting hexagon bombs in the Russian town of Ryazan by local police), most Russians came to believe Putin's claim that the bombings were actually the work of mysterious "Chechen terrorists."¹⁸ It was these still-unexplained September 1999 bombings, combined with two raids into the Russian republic of Dagestan by rogue Chechen, Dagestani, and Arab *jihadi* commanders in August-September of 1999, that mobilized the war-weary Russian public for the resumption of the unfinished Russo-Chechen War of 1994-96.¹⁹

By September 11 2001, Russia's war on terror had, however, become a war on the Chechen people and

more than 5,000 Russian servicemen subsequently lost their lives. As Russia's costly military campaign against the Chechens devolved into a quagmire that took an even greater toll on innocent Chechens, Putin sought common ground with the West in an effort to mute criticism of Russia's widely documented war crimes in Chechnya. September 11th gave Putin the opportunity to establish a personal rapport with the powerful American president, gain a modicum of American support for Russian military actions in Chechnya, and discredit his Chechen Muslim adversaries all in one blow. In the new world order, armed Muslim groups of all orientations and backgrounds were suddenly suspect in Washington and even secular Arab socialists, such as bin Laden's "infidel" enemy, Saddam Hussein, came to be linked to Al Qaeda.

In this new environment President Putin was quick to offer condolences to the American president and the grieving American people. Flags were flown at half-mast throughout Russia, and much of the ill will in Russia that had previously been directed towards the U. S. as a result of its bombing campaign against Orthodox-Slavic Serbia in 1999 began to dissipate. Putin expressed his full willingness to support the U. S. in punishing those held responsible for the September 11th attacks. Putin's unequivocal support for the U. S. led to a stunning array of previously unthinkable concessions. No one could doubt that Russia was fully with Bush in his global "crusade" against the threat of Islamic terrorism. Having shared barbecued catfish on the grill with President Bush at his ranch in Crawford, Texas, during the second Russo-American summit in November 2001, Putin now provided the U. S. with wide assistance, including:

1. Offering the U. S. basing rights in the ex-Soviet Central Asian republics that lay within the Kremlin's bailiwick in order to facilitate the infiltration/exfiltration of U. S. special forces in Afghanistan;
2. Providing the U. S. with Russian intelligence data on Zahwar Kili and other cave complexes occupied by Al Qaeda in eastern Afghanistan (based on intelligence gathered during the 1980's Soviet occupation of Afghanistan);
3. Offering the use of Russian airspace for U. S. search and rescue missions;
4. Stepping up Russian military assistance to the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance, which soon became the United States' main "boots-on-the-ground" proxy army in the effort to topple the recalcitrant Taliban regime.

While many right wing Russian generals balked at the idea of American forces based on Russia's doorstep in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan, Putin correctly sensed the prevailing direction of the wind and wholeheartedly joined the U. S.-led global "coalition of the willing." In the process, Putin won the appreciation of

the Bush administration as it waded into the business of "draining the swamp of terrorism" in Afghanistan with a single-mindedness that resembled Putin's earlier call for the cleansing of terrorism in Chechnya. The world with all of its complexities was now seen by the White House through the prism of the war on terror. The former "evil empire" was now a vital cog in the wheel of the war machinery being directed against the "evil doers" in Afghanistan. While Bush's former counter-terrorism Tsar, Richard Clarke, has charged that such key Bush administration officials as National Security Advisor, Condoleezza Rice, were unaware of Al Qaeda's existence when assuming the White House, the Bush team lost no time in responding to this threat after the wake up call of 9/11.

Russia obviously had reasons of its own for working with the American giant to bring about a goal that Russia's dilapidated military was clearly unable to achieve itself, namely the eradication of the Taliban regime. Russia stood to gain from the destruction of Al Qaeda, which sought to export Islamic militancy into Central Asia and Russia itself (while Russia is predominately Orthodox Christian, one out of seven Russian citizens is a Muslim belonging to such ethnic minorities as the Volga Tatars, Bashkirs, Dagestanis, or Chechens).²⁰ In addition, Russia wished to have its Chechen enemies labeled as "terrorists" (and "Al Qaeda-linked terrorists") by the U. S. State Department.

For its part, Washington had obvious motives for aligning itself with the Russian Federation after 9/11. The American administration's rationale for allying with Russia ranged from Russia's enormous importance in facilitating the basing of U. S. troops in Central Asia, to a growing unity of purpose in preventing the spread of "extremist Islam" throughout the heart of Eurasia. As the U. S. and Russia grew closer than they had been at any time since the U. S.-Soviet meeting on the River Elbe during World War II, it came as no surprise that the issue of Chechnya came to be reassessed by many in the White House and in the halls of power of NATO governments.

At the same time, there was little doubt as to where the Chechen government or the leadership of the 2,000-person "Army of the Republic of Chechnya-Ichkeria" (actually a disunited, clan-based, partisan movement) stood in regards to the September 11th attacks on the United States. On its official website, the Chechen rebel government posted an unambiguous statement by Chechen President, Aslan Maskhadov, which read as follows:

I am shocked! I simply cannot believe this! Who lifted his hand in order to commit this crime? Is he a human being? I am simply struck dumb? and I don't have comments on this. Please notify all that we in Chechnya grieve together with the American people!

We share the pain and tragedy with them. I express the feeling of sincere condolence to all relatives of those who have been killed. I want to assure the USA and President G. Bush personally of our condemnation of any act directed against the population, I decisively condemn all terrorist acts, and I consider that countries which connived at the mentioned terrorist acts in the USA must inevitably be punished by the world community.²¹

On 12 September 2001, Akhmed Zakayev, the moderate Chechen Vice-Premier, also made a statement that left no doubt as to where the Chechen people's officially elected government stood in regards to Al Qaeda's attack on the United States:

On behalf of the President and the government of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria I express deep sympathy and sincere condolences to the entire American people and to the American government. We do not have any doubts that behind the destruction of the Chechen towns and villages, behind the explosions of houses in Moscow, Volgograd, and Buynaksk are the same destructive forces. The Chechen government condemns terrorism in any form.²²

The most resounding Chechen statement condemning Osama bin Laden's terrorist attacks on the U. S. came in the form of an official letter from President Maskhadov on 12 September 2001. This letter presciently warned of efforts by the Kremlin to conflate its conflict in Chechnya with the brewing U. S.-led war on Al Qaeda:

Please, accept our sincerest and deepest condolences in connection with the tragic consequences of the most terrible terrorist attack in the history of mankind. We, the Chechens, deeply grieve together with you... Why do we Chechens so sincerely and deeply grieve together with you, America? Because America is the only country in today's world in which there are traditions to protect oppressed peoples from suppression. You, America, are our only hope for the future, the only hope for peace in our land that is saturated with blood.

We, Chechens, are deeply indignant of the undisguised triumph of Mr. Yastrzhembski (Kremlin spokesman) and of some other public figures in Moscow who are cynically trying to exploit the tragedy in America to justify Russia's own policy of state terror in Chechnya. We are angrily agitated and protest against any kind of deceitful political speculation by any states, first of all by Russia, on the grief of the American people.

Mr. Yastrzhembski, in view of, apparently, insufficiency of mind, has tried to draw parallels between the American tragedy and Chechnya. Naturally, he is doing this to seek justification for Russia's war against the Chechen people who have been branded as terrorists and bandits. If we are to speak about parallels, indeed, there are par-

allels: the murder of tens of thousands of innocent citizens in the name of Russia's criminal-political intentions, the destruction of thousands of civil objects not only on the territory of Chechnya, but also the blowing up of apartment houses in Moscow, Volgograd, Buinaksk in 1999, carried out by terrorists from Moscow with the sole purpose of developing a pretext for the subsequent immoral terrorist war in the Chechen Republic.

We, Chechens, grieve together with you, America. We pray for innocent victims. And we ask God to help you, America, to punish those people and those states that are responsible for this barbarous act.

With deep sorrow, Aslan Maskhadov President of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria²³

In light of these firm statements of support for the U. S. and condemnations of the 9/11 attackers, nothing could have prepared the moderate Chechen leadership for U. S. presidential spokesman Ari Fleischer's post-September 11th *volte face* wherein he blasted the Chechens for supposed links to bin Laden.²⁴ Fleischer's call on the Chechen rebel government to "immediately and unconditionally cut all contacts with international terrorist groups, such as Osama bin Laden and the al-Qaida organization" stunned the Chechen moderate government, which sarcastically replied that cutting non-existent ties to Al Qaeda would be "no problem."²⁵ As the horrified secular Chechen leadership scrambled to explain the nuances of the Chechen conflict to the outside world, the West began to subtly reinterpret the Chechen separatists' cause.²⁶

It was at this juncture that German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder and Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, for example, stressed the need to "reevaluate things differently" in regards to Chechnya.²⁷ In the most telling statement of the U. S.'s changing perception of the Chechens, President Bush went on to declare that "Arab terrorists" linked to Osama bin Laden's Al Qaeda organization were operating on Chechen territory and ought to be "brought to justice."²⁸ U. S. Secretary of State, Colin Powell, went a step further and proclaimed "Russia is fighting terrorists in Chechnya, there is no question about that, and we understand that."²⁹

At this juncture, Russian President Vladimir Putin also began to employ language towards the Chechens that paralleled Bush's Manichean descriptions of Al Qaeda as "evil doers." With this new momentum, Putin gave the Chechen rebels a seventy-two-hour window for disarming. In the finest tradition of reductionist Bushspeak, Putin also proclaimed of the Chechen resistance "With terrorists, we cannot come to terms, we must leave them no peace."³⁰ These bold words were followed by stepped up Russian search-and-destroy sweeps in Chechnya, mass arrests, and nighttime raids on Che-

chens suspected of supporting the separatist guerillas.

In response to this increased brutality, which saw hundreds of Chechens ripped from their homes and executed, *Amnesty International* issued a statement, which warned:

In the Russian Federation there was increasing talk by those in positions of power or influence of using the worldwide "war against terrorism" to solve the Chechen question. Several government officials have drawn close links between Usama bin Laden's organization and the Chechen fighters, stating that Chechens have been trained by Usama bin Laden. Amnesty International fears a further escalation of human rights violations in the region. Amnesty International also fears that in countries where there is an Islamic opposition movement, the government may increase suppression of such opposition under the banner of joining the international campaign against "terrorism."³¹

David Kotz, Professor of Economics at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, further warned:

There are reasons to be wary of the newly developed closer relationship between the Putin and Bush administrations.... The tactical importance of Russian help for the administration's war in Afghanistan has led Bush to soft pedal any criticism of the brutal Russian military tactics in Chechnya. This reinforces the impression that American criticism of "evil" in the world depends strongly on the context . . . that is, on whether the perpetrator is a government that the U. S. desires to befriend or to oppose. Even worse, implicit American acceptance of Russian brutality in Muslim Chechnya lends support to the charge that the U. S. is leading a war against Islam.³²

While the Russian military took advantage of the new post-9/11 climate by stepping up its "anti terrorist" track-and-kill operations in the mountains and plains of Chechnya, the U. S. began its assault on Afghanistan on 7 October 2001. Thus began America's crash course in Central Asian geography, politics, religion, and ethnicity. Almost as soon as the American networks could broadcast their new "*War on Terror*" logos and theme songs, they set about mainstreaming such previously unknown Eurasian ethnic groups as the *Uzbeks*, the Shi'ite *Hazaras*, the *Tajiks*, as well as the *Pashtun* tribes of the south, who made up the backbone of the Taliban's Toyota pickup-borne mechanized "cavalry."

Among the most frightening and elusive ethnic groups reported by the U. S. press to have been encountered by coalition forces in the campaign against the Taliban was a sinister ethnic group of fanatical "die-hard Al Qaeda suicide fighters." This newly discovered group of ethno-terrorists came to be variously known for "their tradition of mercilessly slitting the throats of their captives," "nuclear terrorism," "killing themselves

en masse when surrounded by enemies," providing Al Qaeda with "European-looking terrorists" to hijack airplanes, and seeming powers of ubiquity (i.e., they were said to be involved in the planning or execution of terrorist attacks against Western targets in locales ranging from Paris and Pakistan to Iraq...and Montana!).³³ This ultra terrorist group was not indigenous to Afghanistan or the Middle East, but actually came from the forested slopes and foothills of the distant Caucasus Mountains.

This ethno-terrorist nation was none other than the newly discovered *Chechens*...a small people whose besieged ethnic enclave in European Russia was actually encircled at the time by Russian Federal forces and occupied by a Russian army of approximately 100,000 soldiers, or one Russian soldier for every five Chechen men, women, and children. Almost overnight the anti-Russian Chechen guerillas, whose cause had been previously looked upon with reserved sympathy by Western governments and media sources, became conflated with bin Laden's anti-American terrorists by the American media and leadership.³⁴

Central authorities from Beijing to Tel Aviv scrambled to crush Islamic opponents under the guise of playing their role in the war against bin Laden's network. Like the anti-Israel Hamas, Islamic Jihad, Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, and the Palestinian Authority, the Chechen insurgency came to be misconstrued in many Americans' minds as somehow connected to bin Laden's grandiose global struggle against America and her allies in the Middle East. The American media seemed to be unaware of the fact that Bin Laden's World Islamic Front unified several extremist-*jihadi* groups into one movement but notably did not include Palestinian or Chechen armed forces or terrorist groups.³⁵ Tragically, the image of the Chechens as globe-trotting Al Qaeda super terrorists was soon being promoted not just by the American media's "talking heads" (none of whom were experts on the post-Soviet Caucasus or the Chechens) but also by the U. S. military, and even the White House itself.

Specters: The Chechens as "Die Hard Al Qaeda Fighters" in Afghanistan

In the process of forging the myth of the Chechens as terrorists in the ranks of Al Qaeda and the Taliban, a long-running historic conflict between a centralizing state and an obstreperous mountain people that had dynamics of its own came to be construed as sub-plot to the war against the Al Qaeda network. As had increasingly been the case since the first Gulf War, U. S. foreign policy in the new war on terror often came to be driven by CNN field reports and, within a matter of weeks, members of the White House, from Rumsfeld to Rice, were publicly citing second-hand media accounts referring to supposed existence of Chechen terrorists in

Afghanistan. Specifically, in the months after September 11th, the Western media (and behind it the White House) began discussing the much-rumored existence of Chechens fighting in the ranks of Al Qaeda's 055 International Brigade (the hardened backbone of the Taliban tribal militia). Although this discussion of Chechens in northern Afghanistan was based upon rumors in the press, none of which were substantiated, it soon informed U. S. foreign policy towards the Chechen insurgency.

Few analysts on the Caucasus anticipated the flood of vague media reports describing the existence of mysterious Chechens fighting alongside the Taliban. Specialists on Chechnya who had long decried the lack of media attention to the suffering of the Chechen people were surprised when the Western media suddenly began reporting on the Chechens, not as victims of Russian war crimes, but as "die-hard Al Qaeda fighters" in Afghanistan. Experts pointed out that the Chechen "army" was actually made up of no more than 2,000 irregular fighters who were encircled in the southern mountains of Chechnya. They found it difficult to believe that "hundreds," not to mention "thousands" of desperately needed Chechen *boyevik*-fighters had somehow broken out of Chechnya (without the Russian army being aware of their redeployment), boarded international flights, and made their way through U. S.-controlled airspace to the plains of northern Afghanistan in order to assist the Pashtun-Taliban fundamentalist theocracy.

These and many other reports were naively swallowed by the Western media. Such commonsensical trivialities as the logistical obstacles involved in traveling across Eurasia and the motives that would inspire peoples of vastly different ethno-religious backgrounds and political agendas to unite forces seem to have been entirely ignored by those sensationalizing the news in the U. S.

Among the most dubious accounts of "Chechens" operating in the Afghan theater of conflict was one widely disseminated, second-hand report which claimed "One source inside Kunduz, Afghanistan told CNN that about 60 Chechens fighting alongside the Taliban drowned themselves in the Amu river rather than give up."³⁶ Those familiar with the out-numbered Chechens' tenacious defense of the city of Bamut and other dramatic field actions under intense siege found these unsubstantiated but widely reported rumors to be beyond belief.³⁷ No Chechen bodies were subsequently found in the Amu Darya River.

As the Western media nonetheless recast such rumors as facts, the Kremlin gleefully provided weekly press conferences supporting unsubstantiated American media claims that its Chechen enemies (and not the Arabs, Uzbeks, or Pakistanis, who all had a history of involvement in Afghanistan) made up the largest contingent of Al Qaeda's foreign legion. Russian media sources, for

example, claimed that “more than 300” Chechens had been surrounded in the Taliban’s religious headquarters in Kandahar, that “hundreds” of Chechens had been captured by coalition forces, and that “hundreds” of Chechens had arrived in besieged Kunduz to help defend the 055 Brigade.³⁸ If one subscribed to the veracity of all of these reports and applied simple mathematics to them, one would have to accept the proposition that there were more Chechens reported to be waging war in Afghanistan against Americans than in their own homeland fighting against their historic enemies, the Russians.

Russia media sources even speculated that one Amir Khattab (a Saudi leading a small band of some 200 Arab volunteer fighters in the International Islamic Brigade in Chechnya since 1995) had escaped from Russia, made his way across Eurasia, and was now heading up the Taliban defense of Kunduz.³⁹ Not to be outdone by the Russians, the British media reported that Khattab (the second most wanted man in Russia) had actually brought “1,000” fighters with him to help the beleaguered Taliban defenders of Kunduz.⁴⁰

By the spring of 2002, *google.com* searches on Chechens in Afghanistan revealed the strange fact that no nationality (not even Egyptians, Algerians, Yemenis, or Saudis, who incontestably made up the bulk of Al Qaeda, nor the Pashtuns, who made up the Taliban) was as closely linked to Al Qaeda and the Taliban by the American media as the besieged Chechen nation. Much to the delight of the Kremlin, the linkage of the Chechens to bin Laden and the Taliban was now widely accepted by mainstream America.

As the genre of “Chechen-Afghan-Al Qaeda” myths became a veritable media industry following the winter 2001-2002 rout of the Taliban, outlandish reports of Chechen Al Qaeda fighters continued to crop up in both the Russian and American press. The following American account of Chechens “throwing in their lot with bin Laden” is symptomatic of this genre of widely reported rumors that uncritically toed the Kremlin’s line:

They have been the stuff of nightmares for Russian troops and now U. S. forces face the prospect of trying to combat Chechen fighters in Afghanistan who have thrown their lot in with Osama bin Laden’s Al Qaeda network. “There are a hell of a lot of them and they sure know how to fight,” one senior American officer said after the conclusion of the recent offensive Operation Anaconda against dihard fighters in eastern Paktia province. The man who led the offensive said that a large proportion of the fighters who chose to fight to the death were non-Afghans.

But Chechen separatists, who have been involved in a fierce war for independence from Russia for the past twenty-nine months, appear to make up the largest

contingent of Al Qaeda’s foreign legion. Hundreds of Russian soldiers have been killed in attempts to bring rebels to heel in the breakaway republic, while Chechens have been blamed by the Kremlin for a number of deadly explosions in September 1999, which killed more than 300 people. The explosions prompted President Vladimir Putin to send troops into Chechnya the following month. Russia has repeatedly linked its “anti-terrorist” campaign in the North Caucasus to the U. S.-led war against terror. Just as the Americans have followed the Russian example of waging war in Afghanistan, the United States now also finds itself up against another enemy that has caused no end of trouble for Moscow. Following the downfall of his Taliban protectors in Afghanistan, there has been speculation that Osama may now try to seek refuge in Chechnya. “We know the history of the Chechens. They are good fighters and they are very brutal,” Hagenbeck said. The general said he has heard of reports out of the Pentagon that a unit of 100-150 Chechens had moved into southern Afghanistan.⁴¹

In the midst of this flurry of sensational reporting on the Chechen presence in Afghanistan, several war correspondents who had spent time in Chechnya searched for the bands of “thousands” of Chechens who purportedly formed the “backbone” of the Al Qaeda army in Kunduz, Mazar-i Sharif, Tora Bora, and Shah-i Kot. Veteran combat reporter Robert Young Pelton was among them. Pelton, who had spent time in the trenches with the Chechen separatists during the Russian siege of Grozny (fall 1999), made his way to Northern Alliance warlord Rashid Dostum’s military compound in Mazar-i Sharif, Afghanistan in search of Chechen fighters. Although Pelton soon discovered scores of Arab volunteers, and even one American among the Al Qaeda 055 Brigade/Taliban prisoners of war, he encountered no Chechens in Qala-i Jangi (the fortress used to imprison foreigners fighting for the Taliban). For his part, John Walker Lindh (the captured “American Taliban” discovered by Pelton), who actually served as a Taliban foot soldier in Mazar-i Sharif and Kunduz, told Pelton “Here, in Afghanistan, I haven’t seen any Chechens.”⁴²

Carlotta Gall, another correspondent with first hand experience in Chechnya also went to Afghanistan in search of Chechens and came up empty handed. She reported, “More than 2,000 of the prisoners are Afghans, of whom only the commanders will probably be of interest to the United States. More than 700 are Pakistanis, with smaller numbers from other countries of the Islamic world; Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Yemen, Sudan, Morocco, Iraq, the Muslim republics of Russia, and the countries of Central Asia. Despite assertions by the Afghans that there were many people from Russia’s separatist Chechnya region fighting for the Taliban, there is not one Chechen among the prisoners.”⁴³

A review of the nationalities of the Taliban/Al Qaeda "illegal combatant detainees" taken by the American military to Camps X-Ray and Delta in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, supports these first-hand accounts dismissing the notion of Chechens in Afghanistan. Of the more than 680 suspected Al Qaeda foot soldiers from more than forty-two countries taken to Cuba by the American military (most of whom were Arabs, Pakistanis, and Afghans), not one was Chechen.

In August 2003 I went to northern Afghanistan to interview hundreds of Taliban prisoners of war still being held by General Dostum in Shibarghan, Afghanistan. My goal was to see if any of these prisoners of war had seen or fought alongside one of the "thousands" of "Chechen die-hard Al Qaeda fanatics" reported to have fought against U. S. forces in the Afghan theater. In several days of interviews with Taliban prisoners and Northern Alliance fighters I did not encounter a single person who had met or fought alongside or against a Chechen.⁴⁴

While it is certainly possible that Chechen individuals made their way to Afghanistan to fight for the Taliban in Afghanistan, the complete absence of even a single Chechen POW among the thousands captured by the Northern Alliance and U. S. would clearly refute the wild claims that the Chechens formed the "largest contingent of Al Qaeda's foreign legion" or that "hundreds," much less "thousands," of Chechens were fanatically fighting for Al Qaeda in Tora Bora, Kunduz, or elsewhere.

The question that must be asked if the facts on the ground flatly refute the existence of the Chechens in Afghanistan is: how did the legend of the Chechens fighting for the Al Qaeda in Afghanistan come to have such currency in America after 9/11, so as to reshape U. S. foreign policy towards the Russian Federation and Chechnya? This author has critically analyzed the U. S. news reports of Chechens in Afghanistan and has concluded that the myth of the Chechen Al Qaeda fighters probably began with Northern Alliance Tajiks, who considered all non-Tajik 055 International Brigade jihadi fighters hailing from "Russia" (i.e., Russified outsiders from the former Soviet republics, most notably from Uzbekistan, the source of hundreds of Uzbek fighters in Juma Namangani's fundamentalist IMU) to be "Chechens." This misconception may have been consciously promoted by Northern Alliance Tajik generals, who were working closely with the Russians.

Northern Alliance Tajik commanders, such as Mohammed Qasim Fahim, regularly commented on the existence of Chechens in the ranks of their Taliban Al Qaeda foes. These comments certainly pleased the Kremlin, which in turn encouraged the Northern Alliance to break its promise to the U. S. and unilaterally march on the Afghan capital, Kabul.⁴⁵ Western reporters who relied upon Northern Alliance spokesmen as their

primary source for battle front information subsequently disseminated these Tajik accounts to the American public, thus directly playing into the hands of Russians, who wished to have their Chechen adversaries associated with America's Taliban-Al Qaeda enemies in the war on terror.

Having sifted through many accounts of Chechens fighting in Afghanistan, I offer the following as an example of a typical Western media account of four "Chechens" who were killed when they attempted to run a Pakistani border post in July 2002. This account is a glaring example of the sort of irresponsible reporting that would have been only too well received by those in the Kremlin:

In a skirmish at a remote checkpoint, security forces killed four heavily armed Al Qaeda fighters Wednesday as the men drove out of a lawless border area near Afghanistan, Pakistani officials said. Three Pakistani security men also were reported killed, *The Washington Post* reported from Islamabad. Police and military officers said the four Al Qaeda fighters, whom they described as Chechens, threw grenades at security personnel who ordered them to stop at a bridge near Kohat in the northwest of the country.⁴⁶

A reporter for *Time* magazine who visited the scene of these events reported a completely different story, which did not generate the same international coverage as the previous "Chechen" version:

Niazi (a Pakistani undercover agent) had spent weeks befriending Uzbek al-Qaeda fighters, posing as a smuggler who could take them safely into the frontier city of Peshawar. Now he had lured the Uzbeks into the trap. He would drive them into an ambush in which Pakistani police would capture al-Qaeda fighters alive. From there they would be flown away from the nearby Kohat army base to be interrogated by American spooks... When a Pakistani officer approached the van and ordered the driver to get out, the Qaeda man in the front seat stuck a gun in his ribs. As the driver tried to leap out of the van, the Qaeda fighter shot him. In response, all 70 cops opened fire. Two of the Uzbeks hurled grenades and tried to make a run for the boulders, but were cut down by police bullets. Pinned in the crossfire, Niazi never made it out of the backseat.⁴⁷

As the American media rushed to link everyone from the secular nationalist leader of Iraq, Saddam Hussein, to the Saudi regime (the number one target of bin Laden's campaign), to Al Qaeda, few in the U. S. subjected accounts of this sort to even passing scrutiny.

Not surprisingly, Moscow took advantage of these developments in the American media and began to publish accounts of its own which further linked the Chechens to bin Laden and the Taliban. FSB (the former KGB) sources were soon claiming that there were

"1,500 Al Qaeda fighters" fighting in Chechnya.⁴⁸ In my interviews, Ilyas Akhmadov, the Chechen Foreign Minister (admittedly not an unbiased reference), mocked the Kremlin's claims that 1,500 of the Chechen army's 2,000 fighters were Al Qaeda Arabs. While pointing out the absurdity of this "exchange program" between a Sovietized mountain people engaged in a struggle for national self determination and illiterate Talib-tribal militias defending a theocracy in distant Afghanistan, he sarcastically informed me that there "were no direct *Aeroflot* flights from what was left of Grozny to downtown Kabul."⁴⁹

Despite efforts to bring common sense into the equation and provide a balanced picture of the Chechens, the voices of moderates, such as Akhmadov and the Chechen President, Aslan Maskhadov, were increasingly overlooked by the American media. Extremist fringe factions among the Chechens responded to the increased tempo of the Kremlin's post-9/11 military operations in Chechnya (which the Chechens described as "state sponsored terrorism") with terror tactics of their own.

Moscow's stepped up, post-9/11 operations in Chechnya strengthened fringe groups and Islamic extremists in Chechnya at the expense of the moderate Chechen authorities. As the pace of Russian and Chechen tit-for-tat killings picked up after 9/11, the American public was bombarded by images of black-garbed Chechen suicide bombers taking hostages in Moscow (October 2002) and of Chechen suicide bombings in Moscow, Grozny, Mozdok, Kaspiskii, Znamenskoe, and elsewhere. While these terrorist attacks on innocents were rightly condemned by Western governments, few noted that human rights groups were simultaneously reporting the "disappearance" of hundreds of Chechens in less sensational Russian search-and-destroy missions.

As the war on terror played out in 2002, the Kremlin and the White House appeared to have overcome their differences in defining the Chechen insurgents as terrorists who were linked to their mutual enemy, Al Qaeda. As the mighty American global hegemon stood side by side with Russia in the war against the "Green Threat" of militant Islam, Vladimir Putin, the former KGBnik and master of the Soviet arts of *agitprop* (agitation-propaganda) and *dezinformatsiia* (disinformation), appeared to have pulled off the greatest public relations coup of his career. The Chechens were now no longer defined by America as freedom fighting Davids in a struggle against the Russian Goliath; they were now "Al Qaeda terrorists."

Conclusion: End of the Post-9/11 Détente?

Along with the destruction of the Taliban regime and its replacement by the pro-American Karzai administra-

tion, the U. S. government has acquired thirteen military bases in a ring of countries on Russia's southern frontier. American troops are now stationed in Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Iraq, to name a few of the newly acquired homes for U. S. global forces, countries that had been within Moscow's zone of influence. While the Bush administration had worried about the Kremlin using the threat of Islamic terrorism as a pretext for extending its hegemony into post-Soviet Central Asia, it would appear that America's Central Command capitalized on the war against Islamic extremism to extend its global power throughout this strategic zone. What is truly astounding is the fact that the post-Soviet Russian Federation, which loudly protested the extension of NATO's Partnership for Peace into former Warsaw Pact countries in Eastern Europe, has acquiesced to the basing of thousands of U. S. troops in strategically vital countries that once formed a constituent part of the USSR.

This stunning geo-strategic realignment occurred at the same time as the U. S. government's acquiescence to Russia's stepped up military operations — described as a campaign of "normalization" — in Chechnya. The U. S. government also cut off aid to holy warriors fighting in Chechnya (most of which went to Khattab's Arab-dominated International Islamic Battalion), by closing down the U. S. offices of Islamic charities known to be funding fighters in Chechnya, such as the Chicago-based Benevolence International Foundation and the Global Relief Foundation. But if the Kremlin was hoping to have the U. S. State Department broadly define its Chechen opponents as "terrorists" as compensation for its logistic contributions to U. S.-led Operation Enduring Freedom, it was to be sadly disappointed. Perhaps in response to the growing awareness of the underwhelming nature of the evidence directly linking the Chechens to the Taliban regime and Al Qaeda, by 2003 the White House had begun to develop a more nuanced picture of the Chechen insurgency and its place in the war on terror. In the case of the Palestinians, this sort of reassessment led President Bush to promote a moderate Palestinian leadership as a means for undermining Palestinian extremist groups. In the case of Chechnya, Washington's effort led to distinguishing between *bona fide* Chechen terrorist fringe groups and the mainstream moderate Chechen leadership.

After defining the Chechen Muslim rebels as "terrorists" who had links to Al Qaeda, in the aftermath of 9/11, the White House's evolving foreign policy had, by 2003, come to have a more balanced view of the Chechen separatists and a three-dimensional view of their supposed links to international terrorism. The U. S. State Department, for example, refused to define the mainstream Chechen resistance as "terrorists" and instead limited itself to designating several fringe Chechen ter-

rorists groups led by rogue field commander Shamil Basayev as "Foreign Terrorist Organizations."

When confronted with America's newfound appreciation for the subtleties of the Chechen conflict, Russia's spokesmen could hardly contain their fury. There was a palpable sense of betrayal in Kremlin circles as Russia's leaders looked southward with mounting discomfort towards America's new military presence extending from the Caucasus to the Tien Shan Mountains. Many Russian hawks began to fear that the threatening "Islamic arc" on their southern flank had been replaced by a more subtle threat of American GIs ostensibly bringing the benefits of the *Pax Americana* to the *blizhnee zarubezh'e* ("near abroad," i.e., the former Soviet states).

Kremlin spokesman, Sergei Yastezhembzky, responded to this perceived betrayal by criticizing the U. S. government for trying to distinguish between "good" and "bad" terrorists, while Russian Foreign Minister, Igor Ivanov, lambasted the U. S. with rhetoric that was more reminiscent of the Cold War epoch than the era of the post-9/11, anti-Al Qaeda *modus vivendi*. Ivanov accused the U. S. of "a policy of double standards" and said "in spite of our urgent insistence, we have not been able to get the American administration to agree that all the fighters who are now committing crimes in the Northern Caucasus, and particularly in Chechnya, should be added to the list of terrorist organizations — as has already been done with regard to many other similar organizations in other countries."

The two allies fell out further over the Bush Administration's extension of its "war on terrorism" to Russia's traditional Arab client, Iraq. The Kremlin, which had long sought to have its Chechen adversaries labeled as "Al Qaeda terrorists," criticized the White House for stretching the definition of Al Qaeda terrorist to include the Baathist-Arab nationalist regime of Saddam Hussein. U. S. diplomats appear to be frustrated by Washington's perceived lack of leverage in influencing the Kremlin to seek a peaceful solution to its quagmire in the mountains of southern Chechnya. The differences between the two states continued to grow as the U. S. launched Operation Iraqi Freedom in the spring of 2003.

While overlooked by most Americans, the continuing bloodshed in Chechnya is widely followed in the Muslim world. I have attended mainstream mosques in Jordan, Israel, and Turkey where prayers and collections were made for the "suffering people of Chechnya." The perceived lack of concern on the part of the U. S. and its Western allies for the plight of Muslims in Chechnya feeds into claims that America and Russia are engaged in a joint "crusade" against Muslims. The cause of the Chechens continues to disturb young Arab Muslims, who see gruesome pictures of slain Muslim civilians in Chechnya on Islamist websites. In London's notorious

Finnsbury Park Mosque (home of Richard Reid, the Al Qaeda "shoe bomber," and Zacarias Massoussi, the alleged "Twentieth hijacker"), I have heard calls for young men to take up arms to defend the oppressed Muslims of Chechnya.

As the Bush administration continues to involve itself in regional conflicts that it once ignored, it is in its interest to promote the moderate Chechen leadership of President Aslan Mashkadov as a legitimate negotiating partner for the Kremlin, and to distinguish between fringe terrorist groups in Chechnya and mainstream guerilla groups fighting for national self-determination. Should the West be seen as supporting Russian military efforts in Chechnya through IMF loans and public pronouncements of support for Russian war aims, it may come be defined as an enemy by the Chechen resistance.

In the final analysis, if the U. S. government does not engage in a systematic effort to understand the Chechen resistance and find a balanced solution to the bloodshed in Chechnya, there is a very real possibility that the Kremlin's assertions that embittered fighters from the mountains of Chechnya are anti-Western "terrorists" will become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

NOTES

¹For further articles by the author on the Chechen conflict after 9/11 see website: brianglynwilliams.com. For an introductory analysis of the Second Russo-Chechen War from its outbreak in 1999 to 2001, see Brian Glyn Williams, "*Caucasus Belli*. The Second Russo-Chechen War, 1999-2002. A Struggle for Freedom or Sub-Plot to the War on Terrorism?" *Turkistan Newsletter* (17 May 2002). 22:58:52. <http://gencturkler28m.com/MISC/brian_williams.html> (3 September 2004). See also Brian Glyn Williams, "The Russo-Chechen War: A Threat to Stability in the Middle East and Eurasia," *Middle East Policy* 8:1 (March 2001).

²The only Chechens fighting in Afghanistan during the 1980s were Soviet citizens serving in the USSR's "Limited Contingent." These Red Army soldiers often fought with distinction against such U. S.-sponsored Arab *jibadi* fighters as Amir Khattab (to be discussed below) and Osama bin Laden.

³For a typically damning account see Marua Reynolds, "Russian Troops Fighting in Chechnya. Troops Committing Atrocities against Guerrillas and Civilians," *Los Angeles Times* (7 September 2001), 1.

⁴In the first Russo-Chechen War of 1994-96 Chechen nationalist separatists crushed Russian Federation forces in a series of brilliantly led campaigns. As a result, Russian President, Boris Yeltsin, withdrew Russian forces from the republic and the self-proclaimed "Chechen Republic of Ichkeria" achieved *de facto* independence from 1996-99. Anarchy reigned in the republic during this period as the various Chechen warlords vied with the democratically elected President of Chechnya, Aslan Maskhadov, for control.

⁵U. S. NORAD Early Warning systems picked up the launch of scores of SCUD short-range missiles from Mozdok (located in the neighboring Russian republic of Ossetia) into

Grozny in the fall of 2000. One of these imprecise ballistic missiles landed in a market place, killing scores of civilians.

⁶For stunning before and after satellite pictures of Grozny see: <http://www.freechechnya.org/>. The damage to Grozny far surpassed the much-publicized damage resulting from the internationally condemned siege of Sarajevo by Bosnian Serb forces in the early 1990s.

⁷Michael McFaul, "US Foreign Policy and Chechnya." *The Century Foundation* (March 2003), 22. <<http://reports.stanleyfoundation.org/EAIrussiaB03p.pdf>> (22 August 2004).

⁸Michael McFaul, "US Foreign Policy," 22.

⁹Olga Olikier. *Russia's Chechen Wars, 1994-2000* (Arroyo Center: Rand Corporation, 2001), 63-64. "[T]he Russian refusal to refer to the operations in Chechnya as a war, describing it instead as a 'counter-terrorist operation,' was largely accepted by the press." "The Russian public appeared to be willing, even eager, to accept the 'counter-terrorism operation' as just retribution for the bombings of Russian apartment buildings, the invasion of Dagestan, and Russian failure in the last war."

¹⁰Brigdet Kendall. "Putin's Opportunity." *The BBC Reports on America, Its Allies, and Enemies and the Counterattack on Terrorism* (London: BBC Press, 2002), 163.

¹¹Vadim Belotserkovskii. "Kakaia Uga Ugrozaet Mira?" (What Kind of Arc Threatens the World?), *Novaya Gazeta* (20 July 2000). Sadly, the Kremlin's assertions that the independent state of Chechnya had become an anarchy-ridden center of kidnapping and banditry were true. The breakdown of post-1996 independent Chechnya was, however, partly the result of Russian strategy which aimed to quarantine the impoverished micro-republic, undermine its secular nationalist government, and cause a socio-economic collapse in the region. As a result, many unemployed young Chechen fighters turned to kidnapping Russian and Chechen citizens for ransoms and banditry became endemic in the war shattered republic.

¹²Ismail Khan and Steve LeVine. "The Rebel Connection," *Newsweek* (13 March 2000). Vinod Anand. "Exports of Holy Terror to Chechnya from Pakistan and Afghanistan." *IDS.A*, <<http://www.idsa-india.org/anjun-700.html>> (22 August 2004).

¹³The Russian people would hardly have supported a full-scale campaign against Afghanistan after having lost 15,000 soldiers in this land during the Soviet "Limited Contingent's" occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s. In addition, the Russian army's dilapidated state and its inability to suppress a rebellion in the comparatively small republic of Chechnya from 1994-96 spoke volumes to the Russian army's inability to project its forces to the Texas-sized country of Afghanistan. Elena Obcharenko. "Poletiat li Nashi Rebiata Bombit Afgan?" (Will Our Boys Fly to Bomb Afghanistan?) *Komsomol'skaia Pravda* (30 May 2000), 5.

¹⁴"Vtoroe Prishesstvie. Rossiya Vnov Gotova Vypolnit International'ny Dolg v Afganistane." (A Second Campaign. Russia Again Prepares to Fulfill Her International Duty in Afghanistan.) *Izvestia* (25 May 2000).

¹⁵Brian Glyn Williams, "Rashid Dostum. America's Secular Ally in the War on Terror." *Terrorism Monitor* 1:5 (20 November 2003).

¹⁶Pavel Felgenhauer. "The Kremlin's New Priority" *Moscow Times* (4 October 2001).

¹⁷Michael McFaul, "US Foreign Policy and Chechnya." *The Century Foundation*. March 2003. <<http://reports.stanleyfoundation.org/EAIrussiaB03p.pdf>>, 26 (22 August 2004).

¹⁸To date no Chechen terrorists have been arrested or tried for the September 1999 bombings, although Russian Muslims from neighboring ethno-republics in the Caucasus, such as Dagestan and Karachai-Balkaria, have been found guilty. "More Stonewalling of Ryazan Incident," *The Jamestown Foundation. Chechnya Weekly* 4: 12. http://russia.jamestown.org/pubs/view/chw_004_012_004.htm "Presidency Upon Blood." *Prima News Agency*, 3 June 2002 <<http://www.prima-news.ru/eng/news/articles/2002/3/6/7651.html>> (22 August 2004).

¹⁹Among a host of critics who rejected the knee jerk blaming of the Chechens for the mysterious explosions was David Statter who wrote "Unfortunately, in all three (bombing) cases, the weight of the evidence supports the view that the bombings were not the work of Chechen terrorists but rather the action of the Russian government undertaken to justify the launching of the Second Chechen War." "The Shadow of Ryazan. Is Putin's Government Legitimate?" *National Review Online* (30 April 2002).

²⁰Ahmed Rashid, "The Taliban. Exporting Extremism," *Foreign Affairs* (Nov.-Dec. 1999).

²¹The original text was posted on www.chechen.org. Summary also found at <<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/chechnya-sl/message/18485>> (22 August 2004).

²²www.chechenpress.org. (12 September 2001). <<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/chechnya-sl/message/18487>>

²³<<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/chechnya-sl/message/18503>>

²⁴Bennet Roth, "White House changes its tone. Officials temper Russian criticism, blast Chechens," *Houston Chronicle* (27 September 2001).

²⁵AFP, *Gazeta.ru* (27 September). "Western Leaders Re-evaluate their Stance on the Chechen War," *Jamestown Foundation Monitor* (27 September 2001).

²⁶On the eve of the 1999 Russian invasion of Chechnya, the Chechen leadership and moderate warlords (such as the Yamdiyev brothers) had been engaged in military operations against the small groups of Arab extremist-jibadi fighters who were attempting to spread their Wahhabi brand of Islam in Sufi-oriented Chechnya. When the Russian Federation invaded, President Mashkadov buried the axe with these Islamic extremists and united with the *jibadi umaats* (platoons) to expel their mutual enemy, the Russians. The fact that some of the Arab *jibadi*-holy warriors, most notably a certain Amir Khattab, received funding from extremist charities in the Middle East hardly implicated the moderate Chechen leadership in an "Al Qaeda plot" against America.

²⁷*Deutsche Presse-Agentur* (27 September 2001).

²⁸"Western Leaders Reevaluate Their Stance on the Chechen War," *Jamestown Foundation Monitor* (27 September 2001).

²⁹Michael McFaul, "US Foreign Policy and Chechnya." *The Century Foundation* (March 2003). <<http://reports.stanleyfoundation.org/EAIrussiaB03p.pdf>>, 26.

³⁰"Staying the Course: Realism and the Bush Administra-

tion," *The National Interest* (27 September 2001).

³¹"The Backlash. Human Rights Throughout the World." (4 October 2001), *Amnesty International*. <<http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/engACT300272001?OpenDocument?OpenDocument>> (22 August 2004).

³²David Kotz. "Putin and Bush. Below the Surface." *Institute for Public Accuracy*. (13 November 2001). <http://www.accuracy.org/press_releases/PR111301.htm> (22 August 2004).

³³Brian Glyn Williams, "Shattering the Al Qaeda-Chechen Myth (part I)," *Chechnya Weekly* 4:35. *Jamestown Foundation Monitor* (2 October 2003).

³⁴Al Qaeda's membership is made up predominately of Egyptians, Algerians, Yemenis, Sudanese, and Saudis.

³⁵A few Islamist-jihadi groups with open ties to Al Qaeda that compare drastically with the lack of evidence linking Chechens to bin Laden include: *Harkat ul Mujabideen* which had several training bases run by Al Qaeda in eastern Afghanistan and openly sent scores of fighters to assist the Taliban in its 2001 struggle with the United States. The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan was based in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan and whose members formed the second largest contingent of Al Qaeda's "foreign legion" the 055 International Brigade. The Al Qaeda-funded Philippine terrorist-ransom group, Abu Sayyaf, whose *jihadis* fought with bin Laden in Afghanistan and received seed money from Al Qaeda. The Algerian Armed Islamic Group (GAI) which has supplied Al Qaeda with many terrorists in the North African diaspora in France and elsewhere in Europe. The Egyptian Islamic Jihad led by Al Qaeda co-founder Ayman al Zawahiri.

³⁶Khaled Dawoud and Julian Borger. "Doomed Arab units prepare for final battle against the odds." *The Guardian* (20 November 2001).

³⁷Brian Glyn Williams. "Shattering the Al Qaeda-Chechen Myth (part II). Exploring the Links Between the Chechen Resistance and Afghanistan," *Jamestown Foundation Monitor* 4: 40 (6 November 2003).

³⁸*Strana.ru* (23 November 2001). Also *NTV.ru*. (23 November 2001).

³⁹*RIA Novosti* (23 November 2001).

⁴⁰*Independent* (UK) (21-22 November 2001).

⁴¹Chris Otton. "Americans hunt for Chechens in Afghanistan." *AFP* (22 March 2002); (reprinted in *Dawn* <http://dawn.com/2002/03/22/int12.htm>).

⁴²"Transcript of John Walker interview," (4 July 2002), *CNN.com* <<http://www.cnn.com/2001/WORLD/asiapcf/central/12/20/ret.walker.transcript/>> (22 August 2004).

⁴³Carlotta Gall, "Fighters were lured to Afghanistan by Islam, Holy War, and Promise of Escape," *New York Times* (1 January 2002).

⁴⁴Brian Glyn Williams, "No Evidence of Chechens in Afghanistan," *Jamestown Foundation*. *Chechnya Weekly* 4:33 (12 September 2003).

⁴⁵*AFP* (26 November 2001). Fahim even accused a Chechen of being behind an uprising of foreign Taliban prisoners in Qala-i Janga, even though Western reporters at the scene reported that this revolt was Arab-led.

⁴⁶"Pakistanis Kill 4 on Border," *International Herald Tribune* (4 July 2002), 4.

⁴⁷Tim McGirk, "Al-Qaeda's New Hideouts," *Time* (29 July 2002).

⁴⁸See for example: Fred Weir, "Chechnya's Warrior Tradition," *Christian Science Monitor* (26 March 2002). "The FSB also claims that up to 1,500 foreign Muslims, turned out by Al Qaeda terror training camps in Afghanistan, are fighting against Kremlin forces in Chechnya while 'hundreds' of Chechen military specialists migrated to Afghanistan in recent years to work for the Taliban and Al Qaeda."

⁴⁹Interview with Ilyas Akhmadov, Deland Florida, January 2000.