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## Nightmare in the Caucasus

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# Nightmare in the Caucasus

The new conflict in the northeastern Caucasus illustrates one critical difference between Russia and the Western European colonial empires of the past: that they were maritime empires, while Russia's territorial expansion, like that of the United States until the 1890s, was on land. This obvious similarity has been missed by too many Western commentators who prate about Russia's need to "abandon its imperial heritage."

When they were faced with problems akin to that of Chechnya and Daghestan—as were the British, for example, in Aden in the early 1960s—the maritime powers in the end pulled out and sailed away home. The Russians cannot do so. The North Caucasian republics are not colonies but constituent parts of the Russian Federation itself. There is no natural barrier between the North Caucasus and the ethnically-Russian provinces of Stavropol and Krasnodar on the steppes to the north. Russia's relationship to the Caucasus is therefore far closer to that of the United States with Central America than it is to the French relationship with Francophone Africa, for example.

In Chechnya, Russia finds itself faced with a modern state's nightmare: a region on its immediate frontier which is simultaneously a chaotic failed state, a haven for banditry and organized crime, a threat to Russian control of adjacent regions, and a base for Islamic terrorist actions in Russia. It is as if Moscow had a mixture of Afghanistan and Sierra Leone for a neighbor. The British empire in India had Afghanistan as a neighbor for 100 years, and during that period tried a whole range of responses to the mixture of banditry, religious extremism, and geopolitical threat emanating from Af-

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ghanistan and the border region. These ranged from the bombing of recalcitrant villages to the seizure of hostile leaders by “snatch squads” of elite troops, punitive expeditions and, in the last resort, full-scale invasion. None of them worked for long. Russia’s latest, mistaken, and brutal invasion of Chechnya is no more likely to provide a long-term “solution.”

One aspect of areas like Chechnya is, however, new. Like the modern Afghans, the Chechens have not sunk into complete impoverishment as a result of their lack of a state and can still finance and supply large-scale military operations, due above all to their ability to operate successfully in the wider worlds of smuggling and organized crime. In this way, Chechnya also recalls the experience of some countries in Africa, which despite the complete collapse of modern institutions have gone on earning sufficient money to support parts of the population and, more important, to fund a number of warlords.

When added to the weakness and corruption of the Russian security forces, this has undermined repeated Russian attempts to bring about Chechen submission by means of economic isolation. Frustration at this failure helped lead Russia in September 1999 once again to make the disastrous decision to invade Chechnya.

The United States faces not wholly dissimilar threats from the growing anarchy of Colombia, though with the crucial differences that Colombia is much further away from U.S. territory and is not yet a base for terrorism against the United States itself, though the threat from criminality is of course all too real. Another difference is that, at least since the defeat of communist insurgency in Central America, the United States is in a considerably stronger position to influence events to its south than is impoverished, demoralized Russia with its neighbors. The Russian invasion therefore is not really a sign of strength. On the contrary, it indicates the bankruptcy of Russia’s policy toward the region since the Chechen war of 1994-1996.

## **Failed Strategy, Failed State**

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In August 1996, Chechen fighters drove the Russian forces from the capital, Grozny. Coming on top of a string of Russian reverses, this defeat convinced the Yeltsin regime that they would only be able to suppress and occupy Chechnya at a cost in lives and treasure which was completely unacceptable to the Russian public. The Kremlin therefore authorized the then-national security chief, General Alexander Lebed, to negotiate a peace settlement with the main Chechen military commander, General Aslan Maskhadov. By the terms of the Khasavyurt Agreement, Russia withdrew all its troops from the whole of Chechnya and accepted Chechnya’s full, internal self-govern-

ment. The two sides agreed that the question of Chechnya's formal independence from the Russian Federation would be shelved for five years.

Seen in purely military terms, Russia had no need to withdraw from Chechnya altogether. Though the Chechens could ambush and destroy major Russian units in the mountains and the ruins of Grozny, they could never have defeated Russian armored forces on the open steppes to the north. The Russians could very well have kept the districts north of the Terek River. Initially, the aim of the Russian invasion appeared to be to take back this region as an Israeli-style "security zone"; but by the time of writing, this has widened into an ambitious and indeed criminal attempt to reconquer the whole of Chechnya—criminal because the suffering caused in pursuit of this goal already outweighs not only any original justification for a Russian retaliation against Chechnya but also any advantage to Russia.

The Terek is a much more secure border than the present line across the steppe. Moreover, these districts were an area of Russian Cossack settlement since the sixteenth century and were only transferred from the Russian province of Stavropol to Chechnya (or rather the Russian Soviet autonomous republic of Checheno-Ingushetia) by Khrushchev in 1957. Despite considerable Cossack protests, the Russian government withdrew its troops from north of the Terek and handed the area over to the Chechen forces. In the three years since, most of the local Russian population has fled in the face of repeated attacks and harassment by armed Chechens.

The main reason for the complete Russian withdrawal was that the government and the Russian people were so weary with the war and simply wanted to get out of Chechnya. A strategic calculation was, however, also involved. The Kremlin and Russian military knew that no Chechen regime could possibly accept the separation of the northern districts, which by 1996 had a large Chechen majority. Retaining this area would therefore guarantee further conflict.

On the other hand, in prolonged negotiations with General Maskhadov (a former Soviet artillery colonel), Russian officials had come to believe that this was a moderate, reasonable figure with whom they would be able to deal on a pragmatic basis. Although a strong Chechen nationalist, he does not fantasize—unlike Shamil Basayev and others—about driving Russia from the entire Caucasus, nor is he a Muslim fundamentalist, unlike other Chechen leaders. Finally, his sober, modest character is very different both

**In Chechnya,  
Russia finds itself  
faced with a  
modern state's  
nightmare.**

from that of the histrionic, deeply unstable former president, Gen. Djokhar Dudayev, and from that of Basayev, the famous guerrilla commander and leader of the raid on Budyonnovsk in June 1995.

The Russians thought that, under Maskhadov, Chechnya would develop as a sort of semi-independent Russian client state, in which Maskhadov would prevent attacks on Russia and would protect Russian interests like the oil pipeline running across Chechnya from Azerbaijan to the Russian port of Novorossiisk on the Black Sea. In January 1997, Maskhadov was in-

deed elected president of Chechnya with 65 percent of the vote, almost three times more than Basayev. The leading self-declared Islamic figure at the time, former vice president Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev, received only 10 percent. I thought at the time that despite Chechnya's violent and anarchic traditions, Maskhadov's prestige as the architect of victory and the desperate war weariness of most ordinary Chechens gave the new president some chance at least of establishing a fairly stable state.

**The Chechens' warlike qualities are linked to their new successes in organized crime.**

However, what followed has been disastrous for Maskhadov, for Russia and, above all, for Chechnya itself. Developments in and around Chechnya have wrecked any possibility of economic progress, alienated the West, and driven the Russian government and people into a murderous, implacable rage, very different from the divided and half-hearted sentiments of ordinary Russians and Russian soldiers during the Chechen war.

These feelings have been stoked not just by the bombing campaign but by numerous acts of kidnapping, banditry, and terrorism throughout the period from 1997 to 1999, which claimed in all some 1,300 Russian victims, including senior Russian representatives in Grozny. Some of these acts, like the murder of Russian officials and attacks on Russian troops and police, were obviously inspired by Chechen nationalism, Islamic fervor, and/or a desire for revenge for the suffering caused by Russia a few years earlier. A great deal of it however, seems to have been the work of criminal and bandit groups out for profit.

Maskhadov and the leading Chechen commanders have failed completely to work together to create effective state institutions and gain control of crime, banditry, and extremism in Chechnya. The mass of the Chechen people, despite their exasperation with the activity of many of the warlords, have not been able to mobilize so as to support their president or create new institutions at a grassroots level. This echoes a similar failure by the regime

of General Dudayev in the years between the Chechen national revolution of 1991 and the Russian invasion of 1994 but on a far more disastrous scale. To the depredations of commanders turned criminal warlords has been added a new factor, the rise of modern Islamic radicalism, dubbed “Wahhabism” in the region, although few of its followers are Wahhabis in the strict sense.

There are various reasons for this disaster. Part of the blame undoubtedly lies with the Kremlin’s failure to grant either formal independence or substantial reconstruction aid. Independence for a part of one’s country is of course a very difficult thing for any state to grant, and the Russians could well argue that no other country in Eastern Europe (with the exception of the “velvet divorce” between the Czech Republic and Slovakia) has done so voluntarily.

On the other hand, such a move would have been far safer for Russia in 1996 than in 1991, when the Chechens staged their national revolution against Communist and Russian rule and declared independence. In that year, there seemed a real chance that critically important Russian autonomous republics like Tatarstan would follow the union republics like Ukraine and take full independence, leading to the disintegration of Russia. By 1996, it was clear that outside Chechnya, radical nationalism in other Russian autonomous republics was rather slight, and all of them signed up to some form of union with Russia. Moreover, by the autumn of 1996, opinion polls suggested that a majority of Russians were so fed up with the Chechen War that few would have protested if Moscow had in fact granted independence.<sup>1</sup> If this had occurred, then at least some international diplomatic influence might have been brought to bear, both to support Maskhadov and to deter Chechen warlords from their kidnapping of Westerners and raids on Russia.

The lack of reconstruction aid was perhaps not surprising, given the general circumstances both of the war and of Russia’s own deep corruption and poverty, but it was nonetheless disastrous. Most of the aid would most probably not have been used for reconstruction. The corruption and criminality of senior Chechen officials, like Vice President Vakha Arsanov, is all too well known to Western diplomats who have been involved in negotiating the release of Western kidnap victims in Chechnya. However, by subsidizing Maskhadov’s government, it might have strengthened him against his own internal enemies who are also those of Russia. As the British learned again and again in dealing with Afghanistan and elsewhere, if one wants to maintain a client regime in power, one has to subsidize it. Moreover, anything that could have been done to rebuild Chechnya’s ruined economy would have served Russia’s interests by diminishing the number of unemployed youths in Chechnya, who have no occupation but guns.

## **An Anarchical Society**

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All this is, however, hypothetical. Given the social and cultural traditions of the Chechens and the effects of the revolution of 1991, any attempt to bring stability to Chechnya might have been doomed to failure. When I first visited rural Afghanistan with the mujahedin rebels in 1988, the first thing that struck me was the complete disappearance of the institutions of the modern state. The Afghan tribesmen had always hated that state, seeing in it only the corrupt, vicious policeman, the brutal conscripting sergeant, and more recently, the atheist, ruthless Communist official. They hated it, and they swept it away with all its works and all its empty promises.<sup>2</sup>

The Chechen revolt of the 1990s too has been not just against the Soviet and Russian states but against the modern state too. As in the case of the Afghans or the Berbers, Chechen traditions are such that they cannot easily bear the yoke of any state—even their own—and that discipline in a common cause is only possible in the immediate presence of a common national enemy. Just as from 1991 to 1994, Dudayev failed to create effective state institutions to replace the fallen Soviet ones, so Maskhadov from 1996 to 1998 has wholly failed to harness the spirit of cooperation and discipline of the struggle against Russia.

Of course, the brutalization and the immense economic destruction caused by the war and, above all, the presence of thousands of unemployed, heavily armed former fighters under their own commanders made Maskhadov's task much more difficult. The changes wrought by war and modern organized crime are beginning to undermine Chechen traditions and constraints against Chechen killing Chechen, as well as those concerning the protection of guests. The striking growth of modern, radical "Quranic" Islam, previously almost unknown in Chechnya, also suggests that, as in Afghanistan and elsewhere, many younger people see it as the only discipline that can hold their society together.

The Chechens' warlike qualities are closely linked to their old traditions of "raiding" and their new successes in the field of organized crime. The Chechens may exemplify a trend whereby national groups that are apparently "anarchic" and outside the mainstream of the world economy can survive or prosper mightily by exploiting the cracks in that economy. In the case of Russia, these cracks are gaping chasms.

A key reason why Maskhadov has not been able to establish a state is that he never had an "army." The great bulk of the Chechen forces in the war were spontaneously generated on the basis of informal social groups and traditions and not through action by the state. Maskhadov provided critically important elements of a central staff but otherwise lacked a mili-

tary hierarchy and organization, formal training, formal commanders, and formal rules.

The way in which this anarchical and apparently deeply divided people rallied to oppose the Russian invasion of 1994 recalls the experience of other tribal peoples. A French colonial officer turned novelist wrote of the Berbers of Morocco,

When you wish to pacify them, you will find before you a scatter of humanity. You have to chase after each tent in order to talk to the head of each small family, and to establish any sort of control over them takes years. If you face them in battle though they fall upon you all at once and in vast numbers, and you wonder how you can possibly extricate yourself.<sup>3</sup>

Or as the Russian anthropologist, Sergei Arutiunov, writes of traditional Chechen society:

In peacetime, they recognize no sovereign authority and may be fragmented into a hundred rival clans. However, in time of danger, when faced with aggression, the rival clans unite and elect a military leader.<sup>4</sup>

**Islam is held to as something that makes the Chechens different from the Russians.**

The impressive way in which intense pride, capacity for heroic resistance, and “criminal” tendencies are linked in the Chechen tradition was highlighted by Alexander Solzhenitsyn in a famous passage about the Chechens in the gulag and exile under Stalin:

There was one nation which would not give in, would not acquire the mental habits of submission—and not just individual rebels among them, but the whole nation to a man. These were the Chechens ... I would say that of all the special settlers, the Chechens alone showed themselves zeks, a slang word for prisoners of the Gulag, with an implication of resistance to the system, in spirit. They had been treacherously snatched from their home, and from that day they believed in nothing ... The Chechens never sought to please, to ingratiate themselves with the bosses; their attitude was always haughty and indeed openly hostile ... They tried whenever possible to find themselves jobs as drivers: looking after an engine was not degrading, their passion for rough riding found an outlet in the constant movement of a motor vehicle, and their passion for thieving in the opportunities drivers enjoy. This last passion, however, they also gratified directly. “We’ve been robbed,” “We’ve been cleaned out” were concepts which they introduced to peaceful, honest, sleepy Kazakhstan. As far as they were concerned, the local inhabitants, and those exiles who submitted so readily, belonged more or less to the same breed as the bosses. They respected only rebels. And here is an extraordinary thing—everyone was afraid of them. No one could stop them from living as they



did. The regime which had ruled the land for thirty years could not force them to respect its laws ... Still less will any non-Chechen look for trouble with a Chechen ... The Chechens walk the Kazakh land with insolence in their eyes, shouldering people aside, and the “masters of the land” and nonmasters alike respectfully make way for them.<sup>5</sup>

The heroic endurance and victory in 1996, and the failure of both the West and their own Islamic Caucasian neighbors to come to their aid, increased the Chechen contempt for “lesser breeds.” And of course they have considerable justification for feeling this way. But as the events since 1996 have shown, it is also terribly dangerous for a people to cultivate the feeling that all other peoples are mere cattle to be raided. The anger that Chechen raids have provoked among Daghestanis has contributed to the strong opposition of most of them to the Chechen and Islamic incursions and the lack at the time of writing of mass protests against the Russian invasion of Chechnya and bombardment of civilian targets.

Even more disastrous has been the repeated kidnapping and in some cases murder of Western visitors to Chechnya, including journalists, aid workers, and engineers, and the failure of Chechen leaders—many of whom appear to have been personally implicated—to unite to end this menace. By 1999, it has meant that large parts of formerly sympathetic Western public opinion had become indifferent to the Chechens’ fate. By drastically reducing the number of Western and Russian journalists visiting the republic, the Chechens responsible ensured that the next Russian invasion would receive far less world attention than the first.

## **The ‘Bandit’ Tradition**

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In another time, the kidnapping of Westerners and sympathetic Russian journalists would have been limited by the immensely strong Chechen tradition of hospitality toward guests—which did not in any way counteract a willingness to rob nonguests. The decline of this tradition is a depressing sign of how Soviet modernization and the effects of the war risk replacing traditional Chechen “criminality” with something more chaotic, more evil, and above all more dangerous to the Chechens themselves. Indeed, this process risks undermining the very qualities that have made the Chechens such a formidable force in the field of organized crime—qualities that were summed up for me by a Chechen mafia boss:

We Chechens keep our secrets, and none of our people will ever talk about them to an outsider. We are also united. But even more important is the fact that we are disciplined and self-restrained. Unlike the Russians, we don’t go round killing people or smashing things for fun or because we got drunk. We only use force when really necessary but if we give a warn-

ing, everyone knows we mean it and they'd better listen. That is why all the other groups, the Russians, the Azeris, the Georgians, and whoever—they all have to pay rent to us, and respect our territory.

With reference to the old Chechnya, before the Russian conquest in the nineteenth century, one should perhaps refer rather to a social institution of “raiding,” because “banditry” has connotations of criminality which were not felt by any Chechen, either then or now. However, whatever we choose to call it, there can be no doubt that this institution of raiding did play a major part in traditional Chechen society, with effects which remain to this day.

Raiding has formed an integral, respectable, and indeed central part of many societies and cultures, from the Danes to the Dinkas and from Munster to Malakand. Banditry as a form of social protest has been studied by Eric Hobsbawm and his successors.<sup>6</sup> Banditry as a form of indirect ethnic protest against alien rule has been less studied but is extremely common in many areas. Some examples are Ireland of the eighteenth century, southern Italy in the 1860s, and Georgia under Russian and Soviet rule. All over the Caucasus, the *abrek*, or bandit of honor, is a hero of both oral and written traditions. “Banditry” in Chechnya over the past 250 years or so has not, however, been a static phenomenon. In particular, the later eighteenth century may have seen two major changes, both of which find strong echoes in the present day. The first is that it has been suggested that the introduction of growing corn to the mountains allowed a rapid growth of population with consequent social and economic pressures to increased raiding.<sup>7</sup> The second is that instead of their traditional neighbors, the Chechens increasingly came into contact first with Cossacks and then with the Russian Empire, at a time when the growing influence of Islam among the Chechens increased the perception of Russians as not just succulent targets but as religious enemies. This may have been important if, as elsewhere, traditional Chechen raiding observed certain restraints and limitations—because with regard to the heretical Russians, these restrictions would not have applied. In the words of John Baddeley, a very balanced and neutral observer who visited the region in the 1890s, when the memory of the old days was still very much alive:

Cattle lifting, highway robbery, and murder were, in this strange code, counted deeds of honor; they were openly instigated by the village maiden—often, by the way, remarkably pretty—who scorned any pre-

**The great majority of Daghestanis fear the Chechens and support the Russian forces.**

tender having no such claims to her favor; and these, together with fighting against any foe, but especially the hated Russian, were the only pursuits deemed worthy of a grown man.<sup>8</sup>

Among contemporary Chechens, the raiding tradition has perpetuated itself both in terms of unusual success in the world of organized crime and in brigandage pure and simple. But while organized crime and smuggling has certain positive aspects for Chechnya (as noted, they have brought in the money and goods which have enabled Chechnya to ensure repeated Russian blockades), brigandage in recent years has been almost wholly bad on Chechnya itself.

From 1991 to 1994, the attacks on Russian trains crossing Chechnya on their way to and from Daghestan and Azerbaijan, and the endless private tapping of the oil pipeline from Baku, helped to destroy Russian confidence in Dudayev's government as a negotiating partner and the usefulness of Chechnya to Russia as a communications route. The bus hijackings by Chechens in 1993 and 1994 were directly responsible for the timing at least of the Yeltsin administration's growing intervention in Chechnya, which set Russia on the road to invasion and war.

## Religion and Nationalism

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Chechen "banditry" since 1996 has been even more disastrous, both because of the effects of war but more importantly because it has become mixed up with modern terrorism. An important role in this has been provided by the arrival of the so-called "Wahhabis," radical Islamists with links to the Middle East and Afghanistan. Before the war, and indeed into its second year, these were a very weak force in Chechnya. They remain highly unpopular with most Chechens, and many have publicly cursed the Wahhabis. Their incursion into Daghestan and probable responsibility for the terrorism in Moscow and elsewhere provoked the Russian invasion and a new period of acute mass suffering for the Chechens. Even Basayev has been somewhat sheepish in his remarks about them. Nonetheless, their influence over a growing number of Chechens is logical in terms of Chechen history and the relationship between Islam and ethnic resistance.

For at least two hundred years, Islam has been a key part of the Chechen identity. At one level, the belief that the Chechens are a people especially chosen by God remains of tremendous importance and is intimately tied to the belief that *adat* (Chechen traditions) are supposedly sanctioned by Islam, though in fact they long predate Islam and are even in direct contradiction to Islamic precepts; this gives Chechen life and behavior a particular nobility, dignity, and beauty. Above all, of course, Islam is held to as some-

thing that makes the Chechens different from the Russians and, insofar as they are convinced that they are better Muslims than others, also superior to their neighbors.

However, from my own observations between 1992 and 1996, I would say that for most of this period the Chechen struggle was overwhelmingly a national or nationalist one. As Soviet officers, neither General Dudayev nor Colonel Maskhadov previously have been regularly practicing Muslims; and even Shamil Basayev, while a convinced Muslim, did not give me the impression before the war of being a particularly strict one.

For the first two years after he came to power, Dudayev explicitly ruled out the creation of an “Islamic republic,” at least when speaking to Russian and Western journalists. In his words, “Where any religion prevails over the secular constitutional organization of the state, either the Spanish Inquisition or Islamic fundamentalism will emerge.”<sup>9</sup> It is striking that in his preelection program of October 1991 there is almost nothing about Islam or even about religion in general, let alone any indications of radical Islamism.

**Russia's hopes of re-conquering and pacifying Chechnya are idiotic and criminal.**

Dudayev really began to shift in 1993 as his regime came under heavy internal pressure and as he dissolved parliament and came to rely instead on “traditional,” religiously sanctioned “councils of elders” to provide a facade of democracy and popular legitimacy.<sup>10</sup> However, it was only in autumn 1994, and with the imminent threat of war, that the rhetoric of political Islam became insistent. Even then, I felt overwhelmingly, it was a symbol and expression of national feeling rather than a detailed program in its own right.

The growth of sharia courts and punishments in the separatist-held areas of the mountains from the spring 1995 and onward reflected partly the greater conservatism of these areas but also appeared to spread chiefly from the Chechen fighting groups and to have been motivated above all by military considerations. This was partly simply a matter of individual psychology: men who have been under continual bombardment for months on end and have seen their comrades fall around them one by one may well seek comfort in religion and in the belief that their struggle is divinely inspired.

The need for military discipline also played a part, in forces with no military organization and no other formal code (something I have also seen in Afghanistan). As the war progressed and war weariness and the temptation

to give up and go home grew among the fighters, the sharia was called in as an extra means of discipline, to join the existing ones of familial loyalty and social shame. Such informal, “spontaneous” kinds of discipline have of course been both crucial, given the absence of any orthodox, “modern” kinds of military discipline, and strikingly successful.

The growing success since the war of modern radical Islam in Chechnya owes a great deal to financial support from the Middle East. However, the move to modern Islam also has its logic in terms of Chechen history since the late eighteenth century. Until then, the Chechens had remained a lax, nominal Muslim people, like the Ingush and most of the Circassians to this

day. As with them, the drinking of alcohol remained a key social tradition and many aspects of popular religion were pagan.

The transformation of Chechnya into one of the most strongly Muslim areas of the Caucasus was above all the work of adherents of the Naqshbandi and Qadiri orders of Sufism (known to the Russians as “muridism,” after the Sufi word for a follower of a Sufi leader/

teacher). The adoption of Sufism by the Chechens was, however, intimately linked with their growing struggle against Russian conquest. The Sufi orders provided the mountaineers with an ideology and a discipline to bind them together in armed resistance. The mid-nineteenth-century “state” of Imam Shamil was based on the Naqshbandi order of which he was a leader. Under Shamil, the Sufis struggled with considerable success but also considerable ferocity both to suppress non-Islamic and heterodox practices and to force the Chechen tribesmen to submit to Shamil’s leadership in war. Close parallels can be drawn here with the contemporaneous struggle of another Sufi leader, Abd-el-Kadir, against the French conquest of Algeria.

The Sufi *wirds* (brotherhoods) survived the Russian conquest of 1859 and continued to operate clandestinely under Soviet rule. Together with family and local ties, they provided one of the main mobilizing mechanisms of the Chechen forces during the last war, when the Chechens once again found themselves in battle with the Russians. However, as a result of suppression and isolation in Soviet times, the links of the Chechen Sufi *wirds* to the wider Islamic world were largely broken. They became small, local affairs, often closely linked to individual families. Their practices also became heavily mixed with the Chechens’ own traditions, many of them not originally Islamic. The time was therefore ripe for the arrival of modern Islamic radicalism to repeat the process carried out by the Sufis more than 150 years ago.

**The threat to  
Daghestan remains  
a real one.**

On the other hand, radical Islam has not yet achieved anything like the success of Shamil and his followers. The fact that not just the Russians, but most Chechens and Daghestanis dub them Wahhabis is an indication of the fact that they are still widely seen as a foreign implant. The leading Wahhabi commander in Chechnya, Habib Abdurrahman Khattab, is in fact an Arab of Saudi origin (and a true Wahhabi, unlike the others who follow a looser version of Quranic puritanism, not so closely tied to the teachings of the eighteenth-century Sheikh Wahhab). A number of his followers are Arabs, Afghans, and others. According to Shamil Basayev, five Arabs and three Turks were killed in the August 1999 fighting in Daghestan.

Khattab fought in Afghanistan with the mujahedin and is reputedly a friend of Osama bin Laden. The Russians have alleged that bin Laden himself was behind the September terrorist campaign in Moscow and elsewhere, but this looks like a transparent attempt to appeal to Western sympathy. It is also, in a sense, irrelevant, because the radical Islamic world is not a hierarchical organization but rather a network in which different groups and leaders sometimes cooperate and sometimes act independently.

In April 1998, after breaking with Maskhadov, Shamil Basayev and other commanders made an alliance with Khattab and with a group of Daghestani Islamists who had moved to Chechnya, led by Hajji Bahauddin Mahomedov. The explicit aim of this alliance was to expel the Russians from Daghestan and unite it with Chechnya in one Islamic state. The mini-invasion of Daghestan by Chechen and Islamic fighters in August 1999 was part of this strategy.

The Russian forces drove back the invasion because the great majority of Daghestanis and the government of President Mahomedali Mahomedov fear both the Chechens and the Islamists and support the Russian forces. And they have good reason. With all sympathy for the Chechens for their present suffering, one must recognize that Basayev's and Khattab's project of an Islamic Daghestani regime under Chechen protection could only be achieved across a mountain of corpses, given the nature of the region and the loyalties of its people both to the Sufi tradition and to their own ethnic interests.

The threat to Daghestan remains a real one. In the first place, further terrorist attacks in Russia may lead the Russians into indiscriminate reprisals against all people of Caucasian origin, thereby increasing anti-Russian feeling in the region. Assuming that the bombings were the work of the Islamists and not of some Russian force trying to cause insecurity, this may indeed be part of the calculation behind the attacks. Secondly, by arming local "loyal" warlords in Daghestan to resist the Chechen and Islamic attack, the Russians and President Mahomedov may themselves contribute greatly to ethnic and criminal violence in the republic, ultimately making it ungovernable.

## **Chechnya in Mortal Danger**

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If the growing strength of modern Islam has deep roots in Chechen history, that does not make it any the less dangerous for the Chechens, from almost every point of view. It divides the Chechen people and alarms even most of their Muslim neighbors.

Above all, of course, the growth of a militant Islamic movement committed to a “jihad” against Russia would make any future pragmatic accommodation between Chechens and Russians virtually impossible—and such an accommodation is absolutely essential if Chechnya and the whole region are to live in peace. For it cannot be stressed too strongly that the hopes of Basayev, Khattab and others to drive Russia from the entire North Caucasus are not merely wicked but idiotic. Barring a complete collapse of the Russian state, it will remain in the region for all foreseeable time. This is not so much because of Russia’s military strength, as because Russia has the support of most of the regional population, such as the tens of millions of ethnic Russians in the adjoining provinces of Stavropol and Krasnodar and the Daghestanis, Ossetes, and others who fear a Chechen and Islamic victory far more than they dislike Russian rule.

On the other hand, Russia’s hopes of reconquering and pacifying Chechnya are also idiotic and criminal and, as we can see, carry with them an immense potential for savagery. As the last war demonstrated, a Russian occupation of the whole of Chechnya will be a long, drawn-out, bloody affair with serious losses and much military humiliation for Russia and appalling losses among Chechen civilians. This would be the case even if, unlike in the last time, a majority of the Russian media and public now support the war.

It will also involve horrendous casualties for the Chechen civilian population. Hundreds of civilian deaths as a result of the Russian bombardment had already occurred by the first week of November. The Russian campaign and its murderous effects will almost certainly lead to Chechen revenge attacks in Russia. Retaliation for these acts by Russian soldiers could lead to a scale of atrocity greatly exceeding that of the last war, when the Russian soldiers acted with at least some restraint and did not, with a couple of exceptions, resort to Bosnian- or Kosovar-style mass executions.

The Chechens are one of the great fighting peoples of the modern world and have a formidable capacity for armed resistance. But in the last resort there are considerably fewer than one million of them in Chechnya, compared to some 147 million in Russia. There is a terrifying risk that over the past two years, the actions of Chechen bandits and militants has so infuriated Russians—not the declining Yeltsin regime or its successors, but the Russian people—that, unlike in 1994-96, Russian public opinion will go on

supporting a war to the knife against the Chechen nation even in the face of Russian defeats and heavy Russian losses. And if this does happen, then the greatest suffering will of course be among innocent Chechens, as is already the case. For this nightmarish outcome, Russian chauvinism, stupidity, and brutality will bear a heavy share of the responsibility, but so too will the Chechen tradition, with all its epic virtues and all its appalling defects.

## Notes

1. See the poll in *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, December 10, 1996, that showed 65 percent of respondents approving the Khasavyurt agreement and only 7 percent denouncing it.
2. See Anatol Lieven, "The Kingdom of Kabul," *Encounter* (December 1989).
3. Robert Montagne, *The Berbers: Their Social and Political Organization* (London: Frank Cass, 1973), p. 35, quoting Maurice Le Glay.
4. Sergei Arutiunov, "Ethnicity and Conflict in the Caucasus," in Fred Wehling, ed., *Ethnic Conflict and Russian Intervention in the Caucasus* (San Diego: University of California Institute for the Study of Global Conflict and Cooperation), p. 17.
5. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, vol. 3, translated by Harry Willetts (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), 401-405.
6. Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1965).
7. See Austin Lee Jersild, "Who Was Shamil? Russian Colonial Rule and Sufi Islam in the North Caucasus, 1859-1917" *Central Asia Survey* 14, no. 2 (1995): 207.
8. John F. Baddeley, *The Russian Conquest of the Caucasus* (London: Longman, 1908), XXXVII.
9. Interview with *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, December 8, 1993, quoted in Alexei Malashenko, "Does Islamic Fundamentalism Exist in Russia," in Yaacov Ro'i, ed., *Muslim Eurasia: Conflicting Legacies* (London: Cass, 1995), 46.
10. See Carlotta Gall, "Troubled Dudayev Seeks Islamic Law in Chechnya," *Moscow Times*, November 22, 1994.