

Expert Comment

# Terrorism in the North Caucasus



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# Terrorism in the North Caucasus

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Terrorism in the North Caucasus is not only a serious challenge for the safety of Russia, but is also in danger of spreading beyond the boundaries of the Caucasus to most countries in the region. Having arisen in this region, terrorism has become almost immediately an all-Russia phenomenon. Terrorists have reached the country's core, its capital, thereby demonstrating how vulnerable it is. Nevertheless, it is the North Caucasus that has taken the greatest blows from terrorists, who have chosen this area to establish their operating units. Therefore, the geographical emphasis of this article – the North Caucasus – serves to illustrate the evolution of the article's actual focus: religiously motivated terrorism. Strange as it may seem, the number of reports and articles regarding the North Caucasus is rather limited, notwithstanding the present importance of the issue and its 'over exposure'.<sup>1</sup>

The collapse of the Soviet Union back in 1991 established a qualitatively new reality. According to its constitution, the Russian Federation is a democratic state governed by the rule of law. But whilst the newly emerging Russian society became immeasurably freer than in Soviet times, Russia as a democratic country became a

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<sup>1</sup> This can be seen by reference to a recent bibliography regarding this problem, including: Avdeev, (2014, p.4-20); Djantaev, (2012, p.62-70); Dobaev, (2016, p.172); Novikov, (2015, p.357-362); Stepanova, (2000); Hahn, (2014).

potential target of terrorism just like any other democratic society, and became vulnerable to its most barbaric manifestations.

Russia collided with its first blows from international terrorism in the mid-1990s. As a breeding ground for a flourishing home-grown terrorism, and for the infiltration of international terrorists closely tied to international sponsors of terrorist movements, it was ideal: weakened government institutions and an economic crisis, the emergence of a black market for weapons and explosives, an astounding growth of criminal violence (infighting within criminal gangs, shootouts, contract killings), an uncontrollable flow of immigrants, and the Chechen war.

Initially, small groups of radically oriented communist terrorists executed specific acts of violence: blowing up the Nicholas II monument near Moscow (1998); the explosion at the Federal Security Service reception in Moscow (1999); and the mining of the Peter I monument in Moscow. These terrorist acts were carried out without any human casualties.

However, successive acts of violence connected with the Chechen war were far more frightening. These included the capture of buses, aircraft hijackings, the blowing up of houses, explosions in streets and markets, the occupation of public buildings, and hostage takings. Acts of violence were carried-out in Dagestan, Stavropol Krai, Vladikavkaz, Volgodonsk, and Moscow. Chechen separatism became an international Islamic terrorist movement, well-organised and financed, and technically well-supported.

The act with the greatest repercussions was the hostage taking by Shamil Basayev's terrorist commando group in a hospital in Budyonnovsk, Stavropol Krai, in the Summer of 1995. A group of 195 militants took over 1,600 hostages, rounding them up in the hospital and executing those who resisted (Budyonnovsk Chronicle. Special Project, n.d.). The incident ended after the negotiated return of the terrorists to an area uncontrolled by the Russian army. The demands of the terrorists were met and the incident was followed by resounding dismissals among the security forces and of the governor of Stavropol Krai. Despite the catastrophic consequences (over 100 people killed and hundreds wounded), the terrorists did not initially proclaim any Islamic slogans – the actual act in Budyonnovsk was carried out with the demand to stop the war in Chechnya and initiate negotiations with Dzhokhar Dudayev. A similar act was perpetrated under the guidance of Movsar Barayev in a theatre on Dubrovka Street, Moscow, in the Autumn of 2002, and ended with the storming of the premises, the killing of the terrorists and the liberation of the hostages. This was achieved with great losses among the hostages (more than 100 people died, including 10 children), who were exhausted having spent three days without food and water (“Nord-Ost,” 2004).

Terrorist acts carried out in the name of the so-called ‘Chechen Republic of Ichkeria’ did not initially have any evident Islamic character or basis. They were all carried out with the demands to withdraw the army from Chechnya, undertake negotiations with the separatist government, and recognise the independence of Ichkeria. They did not refer to the creation of an Islamic political project in the North Caucasus. Nevertheless, as time has passed, the influence of Islamists grew among the

Ichkeria movement. Islamists arrived from all over the Islamic world and organised training for terrorists. Serving at military and terrorist instruction facilities, they shaped militants with jihadist ideology. These camps appeared not only in territory controlled by the Ichkerians in Chechnya, but in bordering territories as well. In the Republic of Dagestan's Kadar zone, Buynaksky District, a separate Islamic territory came into being from August 1998. The territory comprised Karamakhi, Chabanmakhi, Kadar, and Vanashimakhi, and was governed by 'Brigadier General' Dzharullah (Malashenko, 2006. p.104), who along with his followers, was under the influence of the Arab mercenary Khattab (Bobrovnikov and Yarlykapov, 2006. p.88-89). This is where the major training camp for militants outside Ichkeria was established, where the key emphasis was indoctrination with Islamic jihadist ideologies (Yarlykapov, 2000. p.114-137).

Nevertheless, the central role in the Islamisation of terrorist activities remained located in Ichkeria, controlled by the commandos. One of the key concepts that facilitated the process was the idea that an armed jihad was being carried out against Russia – a battle led by Chechnya's oppressed Muslims. Chechnya's territory was perceived as the ideal area for a jihad. Moreover, this was just the beginning. The actual jihad, as conceived by its ideologists, would spill over and extend itself across the entire territory of the North Caucasus (Berezhnoi, Dobaev, and Krainiuchenko, 2003. p.112). A major role in igniting this jihad in the North Caucasus – which is in fact simply a terrorist campaign – was played by Shamil Basayev, who was responsible for supervising the operation among the Ichkeria governing body. He played one of the

major roles in the so-called ‘Majlis al-Shura – supreme Islamic leadership council of the Caucasus’ United Mujahideen’, created at the beginning of 2001 in connection with the People’s Congress of Ichkeria and Dagestan. Along with Basayev, the mercenary Khattab became the sharif of the organisation and other foreigners took an active role in its terrorist activities. The eventual consolidation of the ‘Majlis al-Shura – supreme Islamic council’ with the ‘State Defence Committee of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria’ – headed by Aslan Maskhadov, president of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria – confirmed that Ichkeria’s project was experiencing major transformation under pressure from Islamists. Most Ichkerians opposed the Islamic project and remained faithful to a secular Ichkeria. However, time was not on their side and the Islamist voice grew louder and louder, demanding that independence should be sought not only for Chechnya, but for the entire North Caucasus.

The expansion of this struggle in the North Caucasus can be evidenced by the evolution of the Kabardino-Balkarian Jamaat. The powerfully united young people’s Jamaat, created with great difficulty back in the 1990s, remained peaceful while under the guidance of Musa Mukozhev and Anzor Astemirov. But it then became the focus of the Ichkerian Islamists. Propaganda among the rank and file members of the Jamaat led to their rapid radicalisation, which was also unsurprising in light of their growing repression by local security forces in early 2000. At the beginning of 2000, the authorities of the Kabardino-Balkarian Jamaat undertook correspondence with the authorities of Ichkeria, with the goal of convincing them to reject the nationalistic project and to proclaim an ‘Islamic Nation’, not limited to Chechnya alone, but

spreading throughout the entire North Caucasus.<sup>2</sup> The jihad concept eventually prevailed, as shown by the Anzor Astemirov-led assault on the local drug enforcement department in December 2004 when weaponry was stolen. The end result of this adventure was the sadly well-known attack on Nalchik in October 2005, which was followed by an influx of militants from the Jamaat.

Islamists in the former Ichkeria was already in contact with the rest of the Islamists throughout the North Caucasus, and terrorists were affiliated through various networks, justifying their activities by the fact that from the very beginning, Chechnya had carried out an armed jihad which is mandatory for all Muslims in the region. The proclamation of a Caucasus Emirate in 2007 affirmed the creation of a joint North Caucasus terrorist infrastructure, under the authority of Al-Qaeda. The Islamic Emirate of the Caucasus was proclaimed as a replacement for the abolished Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, by its last president, Dokka Umarov, on 7 October 2007.<sup>3</sup> Despite all the efforts to portray it as a nation, through the proclamation of administrative districts (which virtually reproduced the hated Russian administrative territorial divisions), the use of government agencies as the Majlis al-Shura, and the presence of the High Sharia Court (headed until his death by one of the leaders of the Kabardino-Balkarian Jamaat, Anzor Astemirov), the Caucasus Emirate was actually a terrorist network that never controlled any settlements in the North Caucasus.

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<sup>2</sup> For detailed information on the history of the Kabardino-Balkaria Jamaat and its Islamisation, refer to Zhukov (2008), and Yarlykapov (2006).

<sup>3</sup> The official release of the statement by Amir Dokka Umarov, about the declaration of the Caucasus Emirate, can be read online at the Caucasus Blog (Press Office of the Caucasus Emirate, 2007).



The terrorist activities of the Caucasus Emirate were diverse and rather contradictory. Besides the acts of violence within the region itself, the Emirate's militants made sustained incursions into Russia, including Moscow. In March 2010, terrorist acts were perpetrated by suicide bombers at two of the Moscow Metro's Sokolniki line stations. Dokka Umarov claimed responsibility and called one attack an "act of vengeance" for federal security forces' operations in Ingushetia ("Dokka Umarov has claimed responsibility," 2010). Violent acts persisted in the North Caucasus, including suicide bombings. The bombing at Domodedovo Airport in January 2011 was a logical extension of this policy. Responsibility for the bombing was once again claimed by Dokka Umarov, who declared in his video message that the violence against the population was justified by its stance against the Caucasus Emirate.

In 2011, the momentous events of the 'Arab Spring' unfolded in the Middle East. These occurrences had a negative impact on the Caucasus Emirate's leaders. They provoked a resettlement movement (*Hijrah*) to Muslim nations, which was eventually reorganised as a movement to unite with Syrian militants. After all, the Syrian confrontation was interpreted as a just struggle by Sunnis against the oppression of the atheists and Shiite-Alawites that formed the Assad clan. The gradual exodus of young radicalised Muslims to the Middle East reduced the number of terrorists willing to join the Caucasus Emirate, while those already in the ranks of the Emirate considered moving to another front.

Furthermore, events unfolding in the Middle East substantially reduced the financial support towards the terrorist activities of the Emirate, leading to fundraising methods like blackmailing businessmen (via flash drives) and blackmailing corrupted bureaucrats (Bolotnikova, 2012). These devices could be employed beyond the boundaries of the Caucasus; businessman in the Russian North, or in any major Russian city, could be reached – if family were left behind, their life could be a source of blackmail.

These circumstances forced the leaders of the Caucasus Emirate to improvise. In 2012, the Emirate allegedly ordered Dokka Umarov to avoid attacks on the general population – in reaction to a rise in opposition – and to concentrate on armed personnel. However, in mid-2013 the order was withdrawn, based on the fact that the upcoming Olympics in Sochi had to be derailed at any cost. By this time however, the Emirate was practically deserted because the rate of the exodus to Syria had become catastrophic. Aliaskhab Kebekov, having replaced Umarov upon his death in early 2014, once again proclaimed the “inadmissibility of any attack on the population”, but it became increasingly evident that any terrorist activity by the Emirate was becoming progressively problematic due to both the departure of its militants to Syria and its arising financing problems. By the Autumn of 2014, these problems had become so evident that it was practically impossible for the Emirate to retain its field commanders.

The so-called ‘Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham’ (ISIS) gained strength throughout 2013 and 2014, and in 2015 became the Islamic State. On 29 July 2014, the organisation proclaimed itself the Global Caliphate. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was

declared Caliph, and the Leader of all Muslims, also becoming identified as Caliph Ibrahim. Representatives from the organisation announced that it would now simply be called the Islamic State, discarding what they considered to be an irrelevant geographical connotation and thereby stressing the proclaimed caliphate's international character ("ISIS militants have announced," 2014).

The pronouncement of al-Baghdadi as Caliph gave him the supposed right to demand the full subjection of all Muslims throughout the world. The manifesto published by IS stated: "The legitimacy of all emirates, groups, nations and organizations becomes null in light of the caliphate's authority and the presence of its army on their grounds" (This is the promise of Allah, 2014). Such a definition meant that IS had de facto territorial claims against Russia: the manifesto proclaimed that the Caucasus Emirate, along with similar entities throughout the world, were an integral part of IS.

As a result of the hasty decline of the Caucasus Emirate, the terrorist underground in the North Caucasus has undergone extensive changes. The suspension of funding from al-Qaeda means that field commanders have easily substituted their allegiance to the newly proclaimed al-Baghdadi Caliph. Consequently, new cells of a totally new type of terrorist organisation have appeared in Russia, with claims for territorial representation. The Islamic State is a new phenomenon on the political map of the world, and can be called a 'hybrid formation'. On the one hand, it represents a theocratic body politic, political rule over a controlled territory, an administrative apparatus, security forces, a fiscal system, etc. Additionally, the Islamic State does not

conceal its objective of broadening its territorial control over the entire Muslim world, currently for example creating enclaves in strategic countries like Libya and Egypt. On the other hand, it is intensifying its terrorist components by spreading a network of terrorist cells throughout the world, with special attention given to countries that already have Islamic groups at war with local regimes. Its leaders are maintaining the structure of a terrorist network within the territories it controls in Syria and Iraq, and preventing a merger with pseudo-government structures. This makes it possible for the organisation to remain independent from the fortunes of the territorial and political entities in Syria and Iraq, which may be lost to opposition ground operations by various coalitions.

The hybrid nature of the Islamic State cannot be defeated by traditional combat. Lebanon's war of 2006 established that the Middle East had entered an age of asymmetric wars, whereby a fully equipped army can be defeated by a poorly armed network structure like Hezbollah. The same can be said of Hamas in the Palestinian Territories, the Houthis in Yemen, and similar results may occur from coalition operations against the Islamic State. However, every effort must be made to defeat threats like the Islamic State, and partnerships should be made between all countries who share this concern.

The Islamic State's ideology is eclectic and very flexible, and allows it to attract radically oriented young people throughout the world. It is founded on 'jihadism' and geared towards an armed struggle for the establishment of the Islamic State, i.e., a caliphate that will not only unite territories populated by Muslims, but also those

considered ‘historically Muslim’, such as in IS’ terminology, Andalucía (Spain and Portugal), Horasan (Central Asia and Kazakhstan), India, Ceylon, the Balkans, Crimea, and the Caucasus.

The establishment of a terrorist network in Russia demonstrates the Islamic State’s territorial claims in the country. The active participation of Russian citizens in military operations and the recruitment of new militants in Europe has been called for by the IS propaganda machine, which distributes material in Arabic, English, and Russian.

The Islamic State’s determination to widen its breadth of influence, both territorially and by infiltrating Islamic networks throughout the world and subjecting them to its terrorist goals, can be considered the basis of its military and political trajectory. It is not committed to being recognised by other countries as its argument regarding legitimacy is only directed at Muslims, and not at governments or the international community. It is creating a serious level of unrest in the strategically crucial Middle East: many countries are vulnerable, partially due to the prevalence of IS sympathisers among Sunni populations living under the region’s totalitarian regimes.

The Islamic State is a significant challenge for the Russian Federation, especially in the North Caucasus. The number of Caucasians both associated with IS, and fighting with it, is exceptionally high: according to statements made by Salafi participants in various internet forums and discussions on social networks such as Facebook, at the

end of 2014, Caucasians represented 7-10% of the overall IS fighting force. Average estimates of fighter numbers at that time were 30,000; therefore, the number of Caucasians in IS ranks constituted between 2,100 and 3,000 insurgents. The majority of these Caucasians are from the Russian North Caucasus; the number of fighters from Georgia at that time was estimated around 100, and from Azerbaijan, between 400 and 500 (although these numbers may in actual fact be two to three times higher).

Some 2,000 to 7,000 people have left the North Caucasus, and the exodus continues to this day (Vavilov et al., 2016. p.31). We should also consider the fact that young recruits do not necessarily leave the North Caucasus directly. Some become radical extremists in Russia's northern areas, in major cities in the south, throughout central Russia, or in Moscow and Saint Petersburg, and only then do they migrate to Syria.

Young Muslims do not only find the Islamic State attractive because of its propaganda. They are enticed by the promise of social justice that they have attempted to find at home. Corruption, clannishness, and the lack of a career-oriented perspective all encourage young people to search for Islamic ideologies and utopic sharia projects in order to resolve the social predicaments that surround them. Young Muslims have seen this in Syria and Iraq, in territory controlled by an Islamic authority, and through ostensibly Islamic legislation.

When analysing the Islamic State's recruitment in Russia, we can see it is a streamlined and strategically well-ordered, well-defined operation. Its recruiters have

specific instructions with regard to targeted segments of the population. Great importance is given to IT professionals, workers in the oil industry, and doctors – especially surgeons.

The actual network of recruiters in Russia is becoming increasingly sophisticated, contrary to the widespread idea that the internet plays a major role in IS recruitment. Data, based on the author's field research in Dagestan, suggests that about half of IS recruits have joined following direct contact with recruiters.

Recruiters are most often responsible for large territorial expanses. Information from the field reveals the shuttling nature of their work, whereby a recruiter based in the Russian North makes incursions to the North Caucasus and other major Russian cities. The recruiters supply young people who are ready to travel with instructions for how to reach IS territories, with contacts, and with information on how to cross borders. This recruitment network is the breeding ground for the future IS terrorist network in Russia.

Caucasus militants who have joined IS gather experience and become part of the expanding global terrorist network. Their possible return to Russian soil is a huge potential threat. Furthermore, the North Caucasus is experiencing significant changes: the Caucasus Emirate has been practically replaced by the 'Caucasus Province' of IS. Following the death, in April 2015, of the head of the Caucasus Emirate, Kebekov, its commanders started to pledge allegiance to al-Baghdadi and the role of the organisation changed: it became a division of IS and no longer an independent operation. Zalim

Shebzukhov and Aslambek Vadalov remained faithful to al-Qaeda, but were removed from power in 2016 – the former, killed in a sting operation by federal security forces in Saint Petersburg, and the latter, arrested in Turkey. There are no longer any adherents to the Caucasus Emirate.

In other words, Russia has inherited the IS terrorist network with all of its potential consequences. This shift of the terrorist paradigm is one of the most dangerous trials for the North Caucasus – the terrorists from the Caucasus Emirate avoided acts of violence against the population, targeting special forces and appointed authorities. Followers of IS will undoubtedly import terrorist techniques from the Middle East, including some of the most savage and barbarous ones. The victory for IS will realign terrorists in the North Caucasus with the terrorist network created by IS, which is a stronger organisation than all other jihadist movements, including al-Qaeda.

These assumptions are confirmed by the first steps taken by the terrorists who crossed over to IS. Funding from the Middle East was organised around the Autumn of 2015, and by 29 December 2015, the first terrorist attack was carried out against the fortress in Derbent, Dagestan – IS assumed responsibility. One person died and 11 were wounded as a result of tourists being shelled. The attacks continued in 2016, and the April attack in Novoselitskoye (Stavropol Krai) reminded Russians of the danger of suicide bombers once again, while terrorist acts in Dagestan included tactics like assaults on motorcades.



Terrorism in the North Caucasus was initially national, but has now become subsumed within a jihadist organisation that has freed itself from a regional mandate to become an all-Russia phenomenon. On the one hand, the lack of support to the underground by the local population makes it possible for special forces to successfully fight the insurgents. On the other hand, the underground movement continues to be supplied with new fighters thanks to ongoing radicalisation of young people, and can therefore pursue its terrorist activity region-wide. The appearance of the Islamic State's 'Caucasus Province' in the North Caucasus has raised a serious concern: under certain conditions, this terrorist structure could become substantially bloodier than any of its predecessors. Much depends on the intricacy of the fight against terrorism in the North Caucasus and the possibility of surmounting the terrorist recruitment network that has entangled the country.

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