

# Perspectives

## Islamist Trends in the Northern Caucasus

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The threat of terrorism inspired by radical Islamism<sup>1</sup> is now widespread. Emanating first from Afghanistan under the Taliban, it is taking root in Iraq. It is also appearing in the North Caucasus. Most of the republics (especially Chechnya, Dagestan, Ingushetia, North Ossetia and Kabardino-Balkaria) in this area stretching between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea could become the theaters for a new "Islamist terrorist movement" (often a journalistic shorthand) in the short or medium term. At least the idea of this occurring arises from a general observation of the present situation in the North Caucasus, over the period from the hostage crisis at the school in Beslan (North Ossetia, September 2004) through more recent guerrilla events in Nalchik (Kabardino-Balkaria, October 2005).

The present article examines whether there is in fact a risk of Islamism in the North Caucasus and, if so, what the nature is of that risk. Is a regional destabilization possible? Based on several interviews in Vladikavkaz and Moscow during field research in November 2004, and one in particular with a local radical imam, the analysis will introduce the concept of "differentiated Islam." This means that religious language and religious references may be similar on an ideological level, but politically and strategically these Islamist groups act on the basis of local conditions (for example, with respect to war objectives). Nevertheless, mutual assistance and logistical support among the local republic-based groups cannot be excluded.

### *Recent Background*

On October 13, 2005, more than one hundred fighters simultaneously attacked the security nerve centers in Nalchik: three police stations, the Interior

<sup>1</sup> Islamism will be understood in here as an ideology based on a political use of Islam. Any movement with a program promoting political use of Islam is considered as Islamist.

Ministry, the intelligence services, the department for combating organized crime, the prison guards' office, the border guards, and the soldiers defending the airport. According to information from several reliable local sources, none of the combatants were Chechens. They were mostly natives of Kabardino-Balkaria between 17 and 20 years old; one man from Ingushetia, two from Russia outside the North Caucasus, and three from Ossetia were also part of the group. The Chechen separatists did not participate but they claimed responsibility for the attack. This drama allowed the Russian authorities, as after Beslan, to argue to the international community that international Islamist terrorism was attacking their country, spreading from Chechnya to the neighboring regions.

The year 2005 opened in the North Caucasus with a series of special operations that took place not only in Chechnya and in Ingushetia,<sup>2</sup> but also in Dagestan, Kabardino-Balkaria and North Ossetia, against Islamist cells hidden in apartments in town centers. In mid-January, in Kaspiisk, on the Dagestani coast, the security services conducted an operation. At the end of January, in Nalchik, the leader of a local Islamist group, Muslim Ataev, was killed in a similar operation. On 2 February, Emir Yermak Tegaev, the religious and political leader of the Ossetian Muslim community otherwise known as the *jamaat*,<sup>3</sup> was arrested by Ossetian forces. A few months later in May, in Nalchik again, other members from the same Islamist group were killed.

The official Russian analysis seeks to link these Islamist cells with the wide global terrorist network based on the informal Al-Qaida network

<sup>2</sup> These clean up operations (*zachistki*), which are aimed at eradicating potential enemies in a village, had previously only been carried out in Chechnya. After Beslan, they also occurred in the neighbouring republics.

<sup>3</sup> The term "Jamaat" is used to refer to Muslim communities in the North Caucasus. Now it has a strong radical political connotation.

already active in Chechnya. That analysis is not validated by careful field study, although this hardly means that no organized Islamist groups are involved. Indeed, we may identify the following:

- In North Ossetia, a group is led by Suleiman Mamiev, imam of Vladikavkaz's main mosque.
- In Kabardino-Balkaria, Islamist groups are divided between followers of Musa Mokoiev, the non-violent former imam of a now closed mosque and the Yarmuk Islamist group whose leader was Muslim Ataev.
- In Chechnya, Islamism is spreading especially under Shamil Basaev's authority.
- In Daghestan, there are numerous Islamist underground structures, of which one of the more violent is the Sharia Jamaat, led by Rappani Khalilov.
- In Ingushetia, no active groups are yet well known despite Islamism's increasing strength and influence in the republic.

All these groups have their own features and their own history. It is very unlikely that these diverse Islamist factions could unify to constitute a homogeneous radical religious front in the North Caucasus, connected to a larger international network. To explain why such a regional unification of Islamism is unlikely, it is useful first to focus on the ideological history of Islamism in North Caucasus (with emphasis on Daghestan), and then to clarify the respective local contexts.<sup>4</sup>

#### *Daghestan: Key to the North Caucasus?*

While the Soviet Union was collapsing at the beginning of the 1990s and political life was becoming more diverse, in Daghestan the question was raised whether there could be a (re)establishment of politics based on a renewed and legalized Islamist ideology. Islamist groups were divided over this question, not on an ideological basis, but rather in terms of their chosen political priorities and the implementation of these.

Daghestan has always been the home of theological debate in the North Caucasus. Almost all the religious innovations appearing in the region were introduced and/or developed by Daghestani actors. It was in Daghestan in the 1970s, for

<sup>4</sup> The analysis will not include the Republics of Karachay-Cherkessia and Adygeya, where tensions are not so much related to religion.

example, that the ideas and premises behind an Islamic renaissance took shape around a group of brilliant young students. These ideas would flourish with Perestroika and the crumbling of the Soviet Union in 1991. These intellectuals shaped political Islam in the region,<sup>5</sup> notably Ahmed-Haji Akhtaev, Abbas Kebedov, Baggauddin Magomedov Kebedov, Saïd-Ahmed Abubarakov (who became the Mufti of Daghestan in 2000 and was assassinated in 2002), Geïdar Djamal,<sup>6</sup> and Hussein Apendi<sup>7</sup> (Halbach 2001). These figures laid the ideological basis of Islamism in the region, taking into account both traditional Islam, modern and Western liberal thinking, and in the radical writing of the Muslim Brothers. They recomposed these elements according to specific local determinants, such as opposition to popular Islam and interest in democratization after the 1991 rupture. Daghestani political Islam was thus not primarily imported, but locally shaped. Daghestan's Islamism was primarily opposed to Sufism, the main component of the popular form of Islam, which these ideologists consider to have lost its doctrinal purity and its Islamic strength and meaning. Sufism, they felt, is too compromised with local social customs to remain a religious force or become a political one (Lanskoy 2002). Their Islamism, in addition, advocated democratization, entailing abandonment of the communist system and promotion of a transparent civil society. The Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP)<sup>8</sup> tried to operationalize this synthesis.

Politically, however, those ideologists soon had to face a practical dilemma. Should such a political evolution remain slow but realistic, or should the advent of an Islamic state come rapidly by means of force? Baggauddin Kebedov chose the

<sup>5</sup> Source: the author's interview with Abdurashid Saïdov, Daghestani politician, who in the 1990s founded an Islamic and democratic party. He stopped his political activities for personal reasons between 1994 and 1996. He lives today in Moscow. Interview December 19, 2004, Moscow.

<sup>6</sup> Founder, among others, of the Islamic Rebirth Party in Russia. He lives today in Moscow.

<sup>7</sup> Today Hussein Apendei is the imam of the mosque in Kizil-Yurt, Daghestan.

<sup>8</sup> The IRP was founded in Astrakhan by Tatars and by several Daghestani Islamist intellectuals (Akhtev and the Kebedov brothers) during the Congress of the Muslims of the USSR in 1990. It then appeared national sections in each new independent state and in some new federated republics within the Russian Federation (Daghestan in particular).

second option. Ahmed-Haji Akhtaev, before his murder in 1998, put the emphasis on education, and peaceful methods. Abbas Kebedov supported him in this choice (Roshchin 2003). The ideological differences among them were minimal; the main opposition was in the practical application. The same contradiction can be found in Kabardino-Balkaria, between Musa Mokoev and Muslim Ataev. Muslim Ataev, who was leader of Yarmuk,<sup>9</sup> fought in Chechnya until 2002 alongside Shamil Basaev and is also affiliated with Baggauddin Kebedov, whereas Mokoev follows Ahmed-Haji Akhtaev's strategy of proselytism through education and social solidarity. For some time, the imam of the central mosque in Vladikavkaz, North Ossetia, Suleiman Mamiev, also followed the teachings of Ahmed-Haji Akhtaev (Roshchin 2005). Although ideologically, all these men articulate a "pure" Islam free of traditional ideas borrowed from Sufism, Mokoev and Mamiev employ a softer proselytism, whereas others (Baggauddin Kebedov, Basaev, and Ataev) advocate more radical and aggressive methods.

There is no possibility of a strategic political union between these two factions, whom we may call the "realists" (Suleiman Mamiev, Musa Mokoev), and the "ultra-radicals" (for example, the new Chechen separatist leadership under Abdul-Khalim Sadullaev's command). They share only a radical Islamist ideology. Shamil Basaev's attempt in 1999 to establish a pan-Caucasus Islamist movement demonstrates such a failure, following which the radical Islamist movements in the North Caucasus underwent an ethno-nationalization.

#### *Islamic "Localism," or the Failure of Regional Unification*

Attempts to promote pan-regional Islamism failed twice in the North Caucasus in the 1990s. First, in 1991 the pan-Caucasus movement, which had called for the unification of the peoples of the Caucasus into one large confederation, did not overcome emerging nationalist debates that soon broke out, sometimes violently (as in Abkhazia and Chechnya). Later, at the end of the decade, Shamil Basaev, one of the actors in the Confederation of Peoples of the Caucasus who fought alongside the Abkhaz in 1991, tried to use Islamism as a tool for forcing the

unification of the Chechen and Daghestani republics under an Islamic flag. However, the Daghestani population failed to support him and his Chechen fighters had to retreat (Roshchin 2003).

In the Caucasus, the Islamist radicalization of a group does not appear to mean that it will suddenly extend its field of action from the local to the regional level. As Oliver Roy remarks, the two failures of pan-Caucasus Islamism in the 1990s provide a reason for skepticism of the traditional view, according to which a movement becomes more international the more it bases itself on Islamic principles (Roy 2002). Shamil Basaev's failed attempt in Daghestan confirms that Islamism reinforces ethno-nationalist demands. In Chechnya, ethno-nationalism is closely related to Islamism. In other republics, demands may address a variety of issues, some ethno-nationalist, but all based on the local situation.

The situation in Ingushetia is a little more puzzling. A June 2004 attack on Ingush security forces in Nazran suggests that there were forces in Ingushetia who were influenced by the Chechen conflict. However, an analysis of the fighters' motives shows that the main target of those Ingush (and Chechen) fighters was President Murat Ziazikov, elected with the Kremlin's support in May 2002. Accordingly, it appears that if a war breaks out in Ingushetia, then its driving force will be Ingush ethno-national issues. Islamism could become a factor only at a later time.

Reports from Daghestan mention terrorist acts on a daily basis, including explosions and rebel attacks claimed by Sharia Jamaat, an Islamist group led by of Rappani Khalilov. With the exception of that group, it appears that real motives for the attacks are not just the growing popularity of radical Islam among young Daghestanis and the influence of the Chechen resistance. Other factors are at least as significant: the multi-ethnic structure of the population, power struggles between disparate clans, the high level of corruption and unemployment, and human rights violations committed by the police and Federal Security Service (FSB) such as torture and illegal detention. These do not constitute specific motives for particular attacks, but create a tense general atmosphere which could lead to violent unrest, if an Islamist group, such as Sharia Jamaat, manages to use and foment such discontent.

The present situation in Daghestan is indeed deteriorating not because of the spread of Islamist ideology but rather because of inter-clan and inter-

<sup>9</sup> Yarmuk is a radical Islamist group in Kabardino-Balkaria, whose leader, Muslim Ataev was killed in January 2005 and whose members have probably been largely responsible for the latest attacks in Nalchik (October 2005).

ethnic rivalries focused on administrative, economic or political interests. Militant Islamist circles are often used by clans or ethnic groups against one another to engage violently disputes over profitable administrative or political positions at the local or national levels. If policemen are shot, this is not on the order of some international Wahhabi jamaat, but rather is an action taken by one clan whose interests were affected by another clan controlling the targeted law enforcement agency. This does not mean that Islamism is not developing, but it means that Islamism requires a favorable local context in order to develop. The struggles of clan and ethnic interests in Daghestani economics and politics may be such a context.

The phenomenon of Islamization emerges in North Ossetia and Kabardino-Balkaria, yet again in response to local situations, which are not the same as those in Daghestan, Chechnya, or Ingushetia. The political protests of Musa Mokoiev and Suleiman Mamiev are directed against spiritual teachings that they declare to be corrupt and incompetent. Islamist referents certainly animate the views they express, which focus on purely local opposition to the decisions of the Muftiyyat.<sup>10</sup> At the other end of the Islamist spectrum in these republics, the guerrilla operations of Baggauddin's followers (affiliated, for example, with the Yarmuk group) are likewise motivated by local circumstances. Contrary to early analyses, the recent attacks in Nalchik did not seek to import the Chechen conflict into Kabardino-Balkaria but rather targeted the security and power structures, which violently repress Muslim practices, for example, through the enforced closure of all mosques.

Political Islam, spread by leaders such as Mokoiev or Mamiev in the North Caucasus, in Kabardino-Balkaria and North Ossetia in particular, offers a framework for opposition. But not all

<sup>10</sup> Suleiman Mamiev, himself, distinguishes very clearly the political position of the two opposing groups: "Regarding religion, I accept that there is a certain kind of radicalism in discourse. I preach the practice of orthodox Islam at the opposite ends of Sufi and traditionalist beliefs and superstitions which still have great influence at the heart of the Muftiyyat. The Sufi brotherhood does not embody true Islam. Politically, the Muftiyyat, under the influence of Sufism and collaborating with corrupted authorities, can't represent a fair and reliable way forward for the jamaat. I regret this decadent and dirty trend which is present in the politics of North Ossetia." Source: interview by the author, November 12, 2004, Vladikavkaz, North Ossetia.

Islamists remain peaceful and proselytizing. Some of their followers eventually pursue violent guerrilla uprisings. Both types of protest, with differing intensities, respond to purely local problems with local motives strengthened by Islamist ideology. It is probable that the more violent form would develop more widely in a deteriorating socio-economic situation characterized by high unemployment, poverty, and business clannishness. Mokoiev and Mamiev have seen many of their followers enter more radical movements.

*Conclusion: Prospects for Islamist  
Destabilization in the North Caucasus*

Contacts between Islamist groups with specific political aims may be mutually beneficial at the tactical or operational level, in the sense that these links can give Islamism a regional dimension, although based on common means rather than on common ends. Each group would remain free to preserve its strategic objectives while deriving benefit from tactical cooperation through the development of a religiously based network.

This is what happened in Nalchik in October 2005, and it has happened regularly in Daghestan. However the weekly events occurring in Daghestan, as well as the more sporadic events in Kabardino-Balkaria, will not have substantial impact as long as there are no strong radical ideological leaders. Indeed, ideological leaders have been more prominent on the moderate side (e.g., Mamiev and Mokoiev today), and political Islam is itself divided. For these reasons, radical Islamist actions such as the June 2004 attacks in Ingushetia have remained without substantial consequence. For the present, such events outside Chechnya only reinforce the Chechen separatist position vis-à-vis the Kremlin and, indeed, the Chechen leadership correctly claims responsibility for the attacks. Still, they have gained no political advantage from the attacks. However, Islamist destabilization on the regional level could occur if the young, social, religious and radical movements in Daghestan and in Kabardino-Balkaria find a more charismatic leadership that would be able politically to organize the "Islamized" local interests behind the recent violence.

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