EUROPE-ASIA STUDIES
Vol. 60, No. 7, September 2008, 1199–1222

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

The Internationalisation of the Russian–Chechen Conflict: Myths and Reality

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Abstract

The article provides a critical reading of various related discourses, depicting the political motives behind the conflict in Chechnya as a battlefield of the global *jihad*. These narratives have sought to present the involvement of external Islamist groups as a major factor in the conflict, and to portray many of the main groups within Chechnya as subscribing to a *jihadist* ideology. The authors suggest an alternative narrative focusing on the significance of the blood feud in the societies of the North Caucasus. It is argued that it is necessary to differentiate between the radicalisation of the resistance as such and the strengthening of the ideology of *jihad*. It is concluded that the resistance currently assumes a supranational character, yet one which is delimited regionally rather than globally.

AT THE PEAK OF THE SECOND CHECHEN WAR, IN 1999, President Vladimir Putin famously declared: 'Russia is really standing at the forefront of the war against international terrorism. And Europe ought to fall on its knees and express its great thankfulness that we, unfortunately, are fighting it alone'.[1] The war was already portrayed in Russia as an 'anti-terrorist operation' more than a year before the 9/11 attacks,[2] and indeed, a debate about the internationalisation of the Chechen conflict had been going on ever since the first Chechen War of 1994–1996.[3] Nonetheless, on the eve of the Russian invasion of the *de facto* autonomous Chechnya in the autumn of 1999, the debate became particularly intense. From that time on, it became a powerful instrument in Moscow's rhetoric to accentuate the alien nature of the separatist movement by pointing to its alleged endorsement of the imported '*Wahhabi*' faith, to

This article is partially based on research carried out by Emil Souleimanov and Ondrej Ditrych on transnational terrorism as part of the Transnational Terrorism, Security and the Rule of Law (TTSRL) project funded by the European Commission's Sixth Framework Programme.

[1] *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 8 July 2000.

[2] *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 8 January 2000.

[3] By internationalisation, we mean territorial extension of the conflict beyond the borders of a nation state, in this case the Russian Federation. In contrast, we refer to regionalisation as the spread of the conflict within the North Caucasus (see particularly fourth section below).

ISSN 0966-8136 print; ISSN 1465-3427 online/08/071199-24 © 2008 University of Glasgow
DOI: 10.1080/09668130802230739

the number of foreign combatants involved in the insurgency, and the financial support channelled from the Middle East by Islamic charities—in other words, to the alleged internationalisation of the conflict. This rhetorical action is an instrument, it is argued, in the delegitimisation campaign with the objective of facilitating the representation of Chechen rebels as 'terrorists', dehumanising them by pointing to their 'otherness', and portraying the conflict as a sequel of a struggle against *jihadi* terrorism around the world, thus securing the support for the Kremlin's policies *vis-à-vis* the international public.[4] Russia's enemies in the North Caucasus were no longer national separatists, which they were predominantly perceived as being during the First Chechen War, but were now Islamist terrorists—criminals and fanatics who were interested not in securing freedom for their homeland, but were instead immersed in the totalitarian ideology of global *jihad*, striving to establish an Islamic caliphate following the *Salafi* pattern, or conducting terrorist acts because of mere sadistic satisfaction (Khlobustov & Fedorov 2000, pp. 72–97).

The success of this rhetorical action, it is suggested, was facilitated by the post-9/11 paradigm of the 'war on terror' which enabled the successful securitisation of Chechen terrorism *vis-à-vis* both the domestic and international publics.[5] The purpose of this article is to critically examine this rhetorical action, and *ipso facto* the securitisation of terrorism in the North Caucasus on the grounds of its inclusion under the heading of the Islamist international (an international movement). In the first part, this rhetorical action and some internal contradictions are discussed, including the paradoxical representation of the conflict as both an internal and external affair. The second part of the article then offers a critical review of two persistent myths about the conflict in the North Caucasus: first that the North Caucasus is a battlefield of global *jihad*, and second that the Chechens are members of the global terrorist movement, and a manifestation of some transcendent and irrational evil. The third part of the article then proposes an alternative narrative of the radicalisation of the Chechen resistance movement focusing on the unprecedented spread of a blood feud.

Our intent is not to present a case study validating securitisation theory, which has received much attention, and critique, in security studies since the 1990s, although we do accept its basic theoretical assumptions, particularly those related to the ontology of security.[6] Rather, the article seeks to point to the rhetorical manipulation of material conditions by the actors concerned, including the 'securitising actor' (Russia). This is an element arguably underdeveloped in the traditional formulation of securitisation theory, which focuses more on the effect of successful securitisation—namely the acceptance by an audience of the securitising actor's assumption of extraordinary powers—than the possible misrepresentation of extrinsic 'facilitating conditions'. Based on an analysis of this rhetorical manipulation, it may be suggested

[4]In this article the term 'rhetorical action' is used in the sense borrowed from Schimmelfennig, that is 'the strategic use and exchange of arguments based on ideas shared in the environment of the proponents and intended to persuade the audience and the opponents to accept the proponents' claims and act accordingly' (Schimmelfennig 2003, p. 199).

[5]By 'securitisation' is meant the framing of a certain issue as an existential threat to the referent of security and legitimising extraordinary means to tackle the issue (Buzan *et al*. 1998).

[6]These assumptions may be summarised in the proposition that 'it is by labelling something a security issue that it becomes one' (Wæver 2004, p. 13).

that the theory should be reformulated to consider more closely the relation between power and discourse as examined for example, by Michel Foucault. However, our argument here is confined to the critical examination of the dominant representations related to the conflict in the North Caucasus and presenting an alternative narrative. It is assumed that both the critical and the constructive enterprise betray potential to expand the possibility for political action leading to the resolution of the conflict.

Representations of the conflict

Ever since the start of the First Chechen War (1994–1996), the Russian government has attempted to delegitimise the Chechen national liberation cause by depicting the rebels as 'bandits' and 'Islamists' (Cornell 2004, p. 267). There has been a qualitative difference between the legitimation of the first and the second conflicts. Whereas the First Chechen War was enacted *de facto* by the 'Decree on Measures for Restoring Constitutional Law and Order', the Second Chechen War (1999) was consistently represented as an 'anti-terrorist operation'. This illustrates that Chechen rebels have over time become securitised not as insurgents or bandits, but as 'terrorists', whose cause is not national liberation as they declare, but the unleashing of a global Islamic *jihad* on yet one more battlefield (Moore 2007). This rhetorical action by Moscow's government seems to have been successful insofar as the portrayal of the Chechen resistance has been accepted by both domestic and international publics, or at least those who report the news from the area (the media) or formulate policies *vis-à-vis* Russia; notable exceptions are nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) and the civil societies and governments of a few states around the world.

The immediate pretext of the Russian offensive that started the Second Chechen War was a series of bombings in residential buildings in Moscow and the Russian cities of Buynaksk and Volgodonsk during the period of 4–16 September 1999, which claimed approximately 300 lives. Although the perpetrators have never been identified, and senior representatives of the Chechen resistance including Aslan Maskhadov, Shamil Basayev and Emir Khattab distanced themselves from the attacks, the government was able to capitalise on the immeasurable fear induced in Russian society—comparable to the post-9/11 atmosphere in the US—in order to gain support for a harsh response towards the *de facto* autonomous Chechen government, and indeed the Chechen people.[7]

[7]There seems to be some substance in theories about the involvement of Russia's security service FSB (*Federalnaya sluzhba bezopasnosti*, heir to the KGB): for discussion of these theories see Souleimanov (2007, pp. 153–57). There are no reliable numbers of casualties of the Second Chechen War, but they run into thousands on both sides. Moreover, frequent human rights violations including targeting the civilian population, murder, rape and torture committed at the checkpoints and during infamous *zachistka* (purge) operations by Russian and pro-Moscow Chechen government forces have been reported by NGOs such as Memorial or Human Rights Watch. For the latter organisation's recent report, see http://hrw.org/backgrounder/eca/chechnya1106/, accessed 10 August 2007. Cornell speaks of a 'brutal war against the entire people' (Cornell 2004, p. 275); in addition, Gall and de Waal have written of a 'War against the People' (Gall & de Waal 1997). Russell cites as many as 200,000 Chechen casualties (a fifth of the Chechen population) and 25,000 dead Russian soldiers in both the first and the second conflict (Russell 2005, p. 101).

Among the rhetorical steps taken by the Kremlin, aimed at both domestic and international publics, was an order to the Russian media to cease using designations other than 'terrorists', such as 'insurgents' or 'rebels', when referring to the members of the Chechen resistance movement (Russell 2005, p. 108). They also sought to frame the insurgence in the North Caucasus as part of the global *jihadi* struggle (Trenin *et al*. 2004, p. 79), by pointing out, according to Putin that 'we are witnessing today the formation of a fundamentalist international, a sort of arc of instability extending from the Philippines to Kosovo [and including Chechnya] . . .' (Russell 2005, p. 109). This is linked to the above-mentioned portrayal of Russia as the sole champion resisting a new form of totalitarian and destructive terrorism[8] and, in Putin's messages of condolence to America after the 9/11 attacks, to a description of Russia as the first victim of the same ruthless enemies: 'The Russian people understand the American people better than anyone else, having experienced terrorism first-hand' (Cornell 2004, p. 268). It was also claimed in pro-government media reports that, following the fall of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, Osama bin Laden and Mullah Omar themselves found refuge in the mountains of Chechnya (Williams 2003a, 2003b).

These claims have facilitated the dehumanisation of the Chechen rebels by detaching their actions from their true goals, and instead portraying them as a part of a transcendental global contest between the forces of good and evil. Myths about the internationalisation of the conflict have served to reify representation of the conflict as but one battlefield in the universal campaign, instead of as a guerrilla movement's resistance, part of which embraced terrorist methods of combat. Interestingly in this context, Bayev and de Waal point to an internal contradiction in the Russian administration's rhetoric, which renders the North Caucasus campaign both as a chapter in the universal 'war on terror', and as Russia's internal affair in which no external actors should interfere (Bayev 2003, p. 40; de Waal 2003).

Responses to the rhetorical delegitimisation campaign of the Chechen rebel movement by the Kremlin have met with various responses from Russian society and the international public. During the First Chechen War (1994–1996), the Russian people—of which 70% opposed the war from the start—did not seem to respond to the delegitimisation campaign favourably (Russell 2005, p. 105). Even after the Budenovsk (1995) and Kizlyar (1996) incidents, public opinion was not so much inclined to condemn Chechen 'terrorists' as to criticise the Russian security forces' incapacity to secure peace and order. In 1998, 82% of the Russian people in a public opinion poll preferred Chechen independence as a means of resolving the, then frozen, conflict (Pain 2000). The decisive turn, however, came after the bombings of residential buildings in 1999. Despite the lack of evidence pointing to the Chechen rebels' complicity, Russian society in general did not question the official narrative about who should be held responsible—53% of them spoke afterwards in favour of air strikes on Chechen communities (Russell 2005, p. 108; Souleimanov 2007, p. 160). When the Russian public grew weary of the war in 2001 after the 9/11 attacks, President Putin kindled their spirit anew by employing rhetoric of the global struggle against terrorism. In 2002, he did admit that 'as far as the negative image of Chechens is concerned, the Chechen people are not to blame for anything . . . our task is to

[8] *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 8 July 2000.

destroy this image [of them] as terrorists' (quoted in Russell 2005, p. 111); yet on the practical level, the Kremlin has continued the delegitimisation campaign and contributed to the rise of anti-Chechen sentiments and, in a broader sense, xenophobia against native peoples from the Caucasus.

In general, the trend in international responses has resembled that of Russian society. The Chechen rebels, assisted by images of horror and destruction caused by Russian units and air strikes, prevailed in the media battle during the First Chechen War (Russell 2005, p. 105), but they have been losing sympathy since the outbreak of the second conflict. Whereas during the First Chechen War, even when reporting on the Budenovsk or Kizlyar incidents, foreign media did not tend to speak about terrorism, the Dubrovka or Beslan sieges were represented as undisputed cases (Russell 2005, p. 102). After the outbreak of the First Chechen War, Western states and representatives of international organisations showed restraint in condemning the offensive in order to not irritate Russia, which was perceived as undergoing a sensitive process of transition to democracy (Cornell 2003, p. 234). US President Clinton and his then Secretary of State Warren Christopher even likened the Chechen conflict to the American Civil War (1861–1865)—thus metaphorically legitimising the right of the 'North' to regain control of the revolting 'South' and prevent dissolution of the Russian Federation. However, as atrocious images from the North Caucasus started appearing in Western media, the position, at least in Europe, changed. The Council of Europe suspended Russia's membership (1995) and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) severely criticised extensive human rights violations in 1996.

The criticism of Russia by leading representatives of Western governments peaked at the Istanbul Summit of the OSCE in November 1999 and in the following months. It was at that time, in the autumn of 1999 and the winter of 1999/2000, that the international public was shocked by the pictures of massive and indiscriminate artillery and air strikes aimed at the capital city of Grozny and other urban areas heavily populated by civilians. However, the paradigm of the 'war on terror' silenced Western governments on the issue of the events in the North Caucasus. For the US government, the decisive turn in rhetoric occurred by the first post-9/11 meeting between President Putin and President Bush in November 2001. Following the bilateral talks in Ljubljana on 16 June 2001, the latter still mentioned 'differences on Chechnya'.[9] By late October 2001, Chancellor Schröder said at the EU–Russia summit that 'as regards Chechnya, there will be and must be a more differentiated evaluation in world opinion'.[10] Thus, Western expressions of concern about human rights violations and the terrorising of the population by governmental institutions have thus gradually become the sole domain of NGOs and some sections of the media. Few notable exceptions include Poland, Denmark and, until recently, the Czech Republic (Ditrych & Souleimanov 2007). For instance, the then Polish Foreign Minister, Adam Rotfeld, commented on the killing of Aslan Maskhadov: 'Not only was it a murder. It was also a grave political mistake'.[11] The Danish government, on the other hand,

[9]White House 'Press Conference Transcript', 16 June 2001, available at: http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/06/20010618.html, accessed 8 August 2007.

[10]*Asia Times Online*, 28 September 2001.

[11]*Izvestiya*, 9 March 2005.

refused to bend to Moscow's pressure to extradite Ahmed Zakayev, the Chechen Foreign Minister, to the Russian Federation in 2002.

Myths and reality

It cannot be denied that to some extent the Chechen resistance movement has been internationalised, and that this dynamics of internationalisation has contributed to the radicalisation of some of its segments. In turn, this seems to have affected an increase in terrorist attacks since the late 1990s and the occasional cherishing of global *jihad* by some Chechen rebels. However, it is argued in this section that importing Islamist ideas, financing and human capital (foreign *mujahideen*) to the North Caucasus, particularly from the Middle East, has had limited influence on Chechen resistance. Rather its nature has been predominantly a national liberation movement with the limited political aims of recognition and self-rule over a defined territory. To achieve these aims, conventional warfare tactics and terrorist methods have been used by various segments of the movement. However, adherence to terrorist ideas could be interpreted as rather instrumental.

The North Caucasus as a battlefield of global jihad

The representation of the North Caucasus as a battlefield of global *jihad* appears not only in Russia's rhetoric or occasional statements and gestures by Chechen rebels discussed below. It is also characteristic of Islamist ideologists' imagination, in which various regions such as the Balkans, Central Eurasia or East Asia—peripheral in terms of their location in relation to the Middle East—are portrayed, somewhat paradoxically, as central landscapes of global *jihad* (Devji 2005). Moscow's government with its construction of the North Caucasus as a battlefield of global *jihad* aimed at gaining international support and mitigating criticism by domestic and international publics thus ironically meets the *jihadists* and their visionary plans of universal war with the infidels—hand-in-hand, they continue to withdraw from the realm of reality.

A man of fertile imagination, chief *al-Qaeda* ideologist, Ayman al-Zawahiri, sketched his vision of causal events leading to the victory of global *jihad* in the following terms (quoted in Vidino 2005):

> The liberation of the Caucasus would constitute a hotbed of *jihad* ... and that region would become the shelter of thousands of Muslim *mujahideen* from various parts of the Islamic world, particularly Arab parts. This poses a direct threat to the United States, represented by the growing support for the *jihadist* movement everywhere in the Islamic world. If the Chechens and other Caucasian *mujahideen* reach the shores of the oil-rich Caspian Sea, the only thing that will separate them from Afghanistan will be the neutral state of Turkmenistan. This will form a *mujahid* Islamic belt to the south of Russia that will be connected in the east to Pakistan, which is brimming with *mujahideen* movements in Kashmir. The belt will be linked to the south with Iran and Turkey that are sympathetic to the Muslims of Central Asia. This will break the cordon that is struck around the Muslim Caucasus and allow it to communicate with the Islamic world in general. Furthermore the liberation of the Muslim Caucasus will lead to the fragmentation of the Russian Federation and will help

> escalate the *jihad* movements that already exist in the republics of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, whose governments get Russian backing against those *jihadist* movements. The fragmentation of the Russian Federation on the rock of the fundamentalist movement and at the hands of the Muslims of the Caucasus and Central Asia will topple a basic ally of the United States in its battle against the Islamic *jihadist* reawakening.

Al-Zawahiri continues to provide a *realpolitik* explanation of the US approach to the Northern Caucasus:

> For this reason the United States chose to begin by crushing the Chechens by providing Western financing for the Russian army so that when this brutal campaign against the Chechen *mujahideen* is completed, the campaign can move southwards to Afghanistan either by the action of former Soviet republics that are US agents or with the participation of US troops under the guise of combating terrorism, drug trafficking, and the claims about liberating that region's women. (Quoted in Vidino 2005)

What is interesting about this statement is not so much the (unsubstantiated) claim about US financial support to Russian troops operating in the North Caucasus—at the time, the US stance was in fact still rather critical towards Russian policies in Chechnya—or the prescient forecast of US involvement in Central Eurasia in the post-9/11 period. It is rather the assumption that the importance of the North Caucasus as a battlefield of global *jihad* is shared not only by *al-Qaeda*, but also by its principal enemy.

Most of all, al-Zawahiri's train of thought accurately characterises the immodest hopes and great expectations invested after the First Chechen War (1994–1996)—at the conclusion of which Chechen rebels were able to negotiate an extensive autonomy under the provisions of the Khasavyurt agreement—into the 'Chechen affair' by many international *jihadists*. In 1996, two years before he wrote *Global Islamic Front*, al-Zawahiri tried to visit Chechnya. However, he was detained in Dagestan because of problems with his passport and served a six-month sentence there before he was released and deported (his true identity remained concealed to the Russian authorities). Yet surely it was not al-Zawahiri who discovered Chechnya for the Middle East's *mujahideen*. During the First Chechen War, the North Caucasus already had became a focus of interest to the internationalist fighters who saw it as an extension of the struggle in Afghanistan where they had engaged the Soviet Union with the tacit support of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and Saudi Arabia's financial backing.

The disgruntled and radicalised Middle Eastern youth also found the romanticised landscape of the North Caucasus appealing, an ideal representation of spiritual refuge (Devji 2005). Moreover, in the interwar period when considerable attention started to be focused on Chechnya by *jihadists*, the North Caucasus was viewed as perhaps the only place in the world—Bosnia being a case of disappointment—where an original Islamic polity could be established after the *Salafi* pattern. The main cause of this optimism was the temporary absence of any great power (Russian Federation) involvement, weak secular government, grave socioeconomic conditions resulting from dissolution of the Soviet Union, the cruel war as a structural variable for popular radicalisation, and penetrable southern borders. Involvement in such a noble project

as waging global *jihad* against the infidels in distant lands of—albeit perhaps religiously confused—Muslim 'brethren' furthermore granted one a social prestige and provided valuable experience and contacts within the emerging global *jihadi* network.

The critical question to be posed is: to what extent did this appeal of Chechnya in the eyes of the *Salafists* and *jihadists* from abroad translate into direct or indirect assistance to the Chechen resistance movement and penetration of radical alien elements and inclusion of the North Caucasus into the great *jihadi* design? The Chechen resistance has indeed been the recipient of material assistance and inflow of 'human capital' (*mujahideen*) in the struggle against the enemy which had been represented by the *jihadists* as *Kisra*—a name used in the *Qur'an* for Persia—a Zoroastrian, pagan empire (Devji 2005, pp. 83–84). Yet how substantial this contribution has been and to what extent the North Caucasians have lent ears to the radical *jihadist* ideas—and in consequence, transformed their cause from the realm of the particular (national liberation) to the universal (global *jihad*)—remains a subject of careful critical scrutiny.

The presence of Middle Eastern 'Islamic charities' in the Chechen Republic was first recorded in 1995 (Baran *et al*. 2006, p. 29). Benevolence International Foundation, Islamic Relief Organization, al-Haramein and the Joint Committee for Relief of Kosovo are all reputed to have been active in the North Caucasus. The Muslim Brotherhood seems to have been a key source of funding for Emir Khattab's activities (Wilhelmsen 2004, p. 41). Some amount of money, according to Russia's government, has also been provided by Osama Bin Laden, but radicals in the North Caucasus have never confirmed the information, and it remains disputed (LaFraniere 2001).

The US State Department estimated that in sum, around $100 million was channelled to the Chechen resistance from the Middle East (Williams 2003a). The FSB put the amount at $6 million per month in 2000.[12] The method of arriving at these figures has, however, not been revealed and given the fact that the North Caucasus' culture has traditionally been militarised—that is, there has been considerable circulation of small arms and alternative sources of funding have been available to the Chechen resistance, notably from Chechen mafias operating in the Russian Federation—this estimate is likely to be much overstated. Under the conditions of extensive arms proliferation in the post-Soviet area, weaponry and equipment for improvised explosive devices (IEDs) used in terrorist acts may be considered to be readily available at reasonable costs. In this context Aslan Maskhadov's rhetorical question sounds reasonable: 'Why do we need weapons from abroad? There are plenty of weapons here, and much cheaper, too. We do not need military or training from abroad'.[13] Most of the resources may be assumed to have been used for funding the salaries of Islamist armed fighters—who are not very numerous—and in the interwar period (1996–1999), for founding mosques and increasing the power of some Chechen resistance members against the secular leadership. Moreover, not all the channelled resources should be considered to support military activities of the resistance movement or the dissemination of *Salafi* ideas—it is not implausible to assume that some were aimed at post-conflict reconstruction and presented a genuine relief aid.

[12] *Izvestiya*, 26 January 2002.
[13] Quoted in LaFraniere (2001).

However, although the extent of external financial flow from the Middle East to the North Caucasus should not be overestimated, it has been significant for the Middle Eastern emissaries of *jihad* in the North Caucasus such as Emir Khattab and Abu al-Walid—leaders of the 'Islamic Battalion' in the North Caucasus—and for factions of the Chechen resistance which, at least for some time, and for rather instrumental purposes, adhered to the *jihadist* credo, such as the network around Shamil Basayev between 1965 and 2006. The increase in anti-terrorist financing policies enacted around the world after the 9/11 attacks and the coordination of activities in the area of intelligence services at a supranational level have, however, facilitated unprecedented supervision of the activities of organisations involved in financing global *jihad*—resulting for example in the arrest in London of the controversial Muslim cleric, Abu Hamza al-Masri, who, amongst other activities, had participated in fundraising and leadership assistance for Chechen separatists. The increased and more effective surveillance of terrorist financing has 'dealt a hard blow to these Arab fighters, whose financial power was an essential factor in recruitment and politics in Chechnya' (al-Shishani 2005). The Chechen rebels who had been receiving foreign funding have complained about the new unfavourable situation. For example, as Basayev told reporters in 2004:

> I am ashamed of Muslims. During the three years since September 11, nobody at all has helped us. Everybody is afraid of being associated with 'terrorists', and I am not good enough to ask for help from everyone that can be asked.[14]

Much has been said and written about the personal involvement in the Chechen conflict of militants from the Middle East—some of whom were *mujahideen* in Afghanistan in the 1980s. These include Emir Khattab and Abu al-Walid, Saudi born veteran *mujahideen*, adherents of *Salafism* and successive commanders of the Special Purpose Islamic Regiment (SPIR) in the North Caucasus, who facilitated contacts between the global *jihadi* network and Chechen rebels, particularly those around Shamil Basayev. Both of them were killed—the former after being poisoned in mysterious circumstances in 2002, the latter in 2004. Abu Ahmad al-Azimi, Abu Omar Muhammad al-Saif and Mahmud Hinnawi were other *Salafi* militants of Middle Eastern descent who took part in the North Caucasus war, and 'Abu Bakr' was identified as a Middle Eastern henchman to the commando leader Movsar Barayev in the Dubrovka terrorist incident (2002). The Russian government's assessment that approximately one third of 'Chechen' combatants are in fact mercenaries from the Middle East completes the reification of the representation of the Chechen resistance as a battlefield of global *jihad* penetrated by alien personal elements.[15]

However, while the temporary presence of aliens, even prominent ones, in the North Caucasus may confirm the attraction of this landscape for those persons as a

[14] *Globe and Mail*, 11 November 2004.

[15] Occasionally, the battlefield would be expanded to include Georgia's Pankisi Gorge as a safe haven for the Chechen militants and global *jihadists* in order to exert international pressure on that country. According to numerous accounts—including formal statements by the Tbilisi government—this hinterland area inhabited by Kists, an ethnic group related to Chechens, was not under the control of Georgia's state authorities from the end of the 1990s until 2003 and indeed served as a haven to both Chechen guerrillas and some international *mujahideen*.

battlefield of global *jihad*, it does not necessarily transform the conflict from a national liberation war to a contest over universalist principles. Moreover, their involvement has in quantitative terms been rather limited. The total number of Arab Islamist militants has been estimated at no more than 300 (Williams 2003a; Souleimanov 2007, p. 285), in contrast to the official Russian figures of between 500 and 700.[16] Furthermore, since the operations of global *jihad* were expanded to include Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003, peripheral areas such as the North Caucasus and Bosnia have lost most of their former prominence for Arab volunteers, and their presence and inflow have decreased. This inflow was in fact already hindered in the late 1990s when Russian troops began to guard the formerly porous Chechen borders with Dagestan and Georgia more effectively.

Life has not been easy for Middle Eastern *jihadi* internationals in any of the 'peripheral' battlefields—whether in Afghanistan, Bosnia or the North Caucasus—due to their different appearance, ignorance of local languages and customs, the difficulties in blending with local populations because of traditional social patterns,[17] harsh living conditions and the risk of immediate death. In the North Caucasus, despite radicalisation due to the continuous state of insecurity and chaos, the lukewarm reaction to *Salafi* ideas by the local population—who adhered to the indigenous version of Islam and were keenly attached to local festive traditions—contributed to a chasm between the locals and Middle Eastern *jihadists*. Moreover, the 'purist' foreigners were associated with importing many new troubles to the area, such as drug trafficking and the spread of organised crime (Wilhelmsen 2004, p. 31).

It is also interesting to note in this context that many of the 'internationals' from the Middle East with foreign passports issued in Arabic or Turkish names were in fact assimilated descendants of North Caucasian migrants from the nineteenth century (*muhajirun*), maintaining an intense spiritual link to their former homeland. It is thus no coincidence that most of the 'foreigners' who came to the North Caucasus hailed from Turkey, Syria and Jordan (Williams & Altindag 2005), countries where there are relatively sizeable and mutually supportive communities of Chechens, Circassians (*Adyge*) and other North Caucasian ethnicities.

The assumption that *Salafi* and *jihadi* universalist ideas met with a restrained response from local populations is further supported by a discussion of the characteristics of local Islam which are in fundamental discord with the contemporary *Salafist* interpretation of *jihad*. Notwithstanding the mark that seven decades of Soviet 'scientific' atheism left, particularly in the urbanised segments of the North Caucasus' societies, the local tradition of Islam survived in a form that varies significantly from

[16]This figure assumes that the total number of Chechen rebels reached approximately 1,500 combatants—a number presented by Regional Operations Staff for Direction of Anti-Terrorist Operations in the North Caucasus, Major General Arkady Yedelev and the Russian Presidential Plenipotentiary in the Southern Federal District, Dmitri Kozak (*Chechenskoye obshchestvo*, 26 September 2005). Even this total number of Chechen rebels may arguably be overstated to justify the deployment of the Russian army and FSB units of considerable size in the North Caucasus, alongside the local government's militias.

[17]Traditionally endogamous Chechens tend to be very reluctant to give consent for their daughters and sisters to marry foreigners. Emir Khattab did marry in the North Caucasus, however, to a Dagestani Darginian.

the version of Muslim faith advanced by the *jihadists*. The Chechen, and more generally the Vaynakh people—the latter ethnonym encompassing also the Ingush and the Kists in northern Georgia—embraced Islam only in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and their faith was in many aspects superficial, including some remnants of paganism and retaining some elements alien to orthodox Islam, most particularly the local customary law (*adat*) which is irreconcilable with the *shari'a* particularly due to the institutions of the blood feud and the warrior ethic of sacrifice (Souleimanov 2007, pp. 30–33). These 'deviations' were retained even after the more substantive Islamisation of the mountainous nations of the North Caucasus during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when notable Sufi elements penetrated the Chechens' Islamic faith. Together with local habits such as widespread consumption of alcohol, these aspects of local Islam made the incoming '*Wahhabi*' and *Salafi* consider local populations to be apostates from the true, pure faith (*murtaddun*) or, in the extreme interpretation, even unbelievers (*kuffar*). This significantly contributed to the chasm between the indigenous societies and incoming *jihadists*, particularly due to the missionary zeal of the latter.

Perhaps even more fundamental discord lay in the different interpretations of 'holy war' by the North Caucasian societies and the *jihadists*. Whereas for the latter, *jihad* is a universal conflict about order, the North Caucasus' tradition of *ghazavat* has served rather as an instrument of social mobilisation against the external enemy. Hand-in-hand with the social function of Islam as a banner under which the mountain dwellers of the North Caucasus, fragmented into numerous communities, could be united against a common foe, religion has also served as a vehicle of national identity in the absence of any other clearly defined common denominator *vis-à-vis* the external 'other'. By this mobilisation and identification function, the North Caucasus' *ghazavat* stands in essence as a particularist concept, distinct from the universalist and Utopian vision of the global *jihad*. It was this tradition of 'holy war' that was utilised by secular political elites led by Jokhar Dudayev in the period 1994–1996, as well as the already noted functions of Islam, and the evocation of heroic representations of eighteenth and nineteenth century resistance against Russia in the Chechen collective memory.

However, the idea of the Islamic state was resisted by Chechen leaders since the beginning of the 1990s. 'I would like the Chechen Republic to be an institutional secular state', Dudayev told *Literaturnaya gazeta*.[18] In respect to the religious rhetoric assumed by the secular elites of the resistance at this period, Lieven speaks of 'a spiritual clothing for [Chechen] national struggle' (Lieven 1999, p. 357). The subsequent 'religionisation' of Chechen politics in the latter part of the conflict and in the interwar period, manifested for example, in the rise of *shari'a* courts, may also be interpreted in instrumental terms rather than as a consequence of the internationalisation. Instead of resulting from the importation of *Salafi* and *jihadi* ideas from abroad, the order effected by Islamic norms was sought due to the perceived need to impose discipline on the chaos and to provide a substitution for weak or absent governance when the traditional socio-political patterns were being disrupted. Radicalisation of the Chechen resistance has been a continuous feature in the North Caucasus since this period, yet it is difficult to attribute this radicalisation to

[18] *Literaturnaya gazeta*, 12 August 1992.

internationalisation of the conflict as the one main variable rather than the weak socioeconomic conditions, insecurity, generational change or the spread of the blood feud; and it is even more problematic to equate this radicalisation to *jihadism*. *Salafi* ideas are adhered to by no more than between 5% and 10% of the Chechen population, their limited appeal stemming from the reasons mentioned above. It is true, however, that this movement, however small, is disciplined and orchestrated, and in consequence may have disproportional political influence.

In the late 1990s, when the chasm between the secular and *Salafi* segments of the rebel movement widened, in particular after the incursion into Dagestan in 1999, President Maskhadov strove to forge a social compromise with the radicals—venturing as far in 1999 as to declare Ichkeria, the mountainous area in the southeast of Chechnya, an Islamic state. Even earlier, Maskhadov established a '*shari'a* regiment' responsible for the adherence of citizens to the *shari'a* code, not dissimilar to Saudi Arabia's *mutawa'in*. But unable to accommodate their radical demands, he condemned the *Salafi*, stating for instance in a televised speech that '[they] divide us according to faith, which subsequently leads to civil war' (Ichkeria TV, 20 January 1999)—and even asked Moscow for assistance to avoid internal collapse in 1999. The Kremlin, however, chose another solution—launching the Second Chechen War instead.

It was during this conflict that the radical Islamist elements—those imported from the Middle East—became more noticeable, their manifestation being twofold. First, the continuing radicalisation of not only the Chechen resistance movement, but the entire Chechen and North Caucasian society displayed more signs of imported '*Wahhabism*' and a number of new *jamaats* emerged over the region; and secondly, the new wave of terrorism gained a more pronounced Islamist character. Terrorists in the Dubrovka Theatre (2002), for instance, made extensive use of Islamic symbols in their televised appearances on Russia's *NTV* and Qatar's *al-Jazeera* network, and ubiquitously employed *shahid* (martyr) rhetoric: 'Each of us is ready for self-sacrifice for Allah and for the independence of Chechnya. We desire death more than you desire life', one of the terrorists claimed in an interview for *al-Jazeera* (broadcast 24 October 2004). The suicide attacks carried out by 'Black widows' earlier that summer on airliners *en route* from Moscow to Sochi and Volgograd, claiming 90 lives, could also be interpreted as an imported Islamist element. Following Maskhadov's death in 2005 it was expected that the '*Wahhabi*' would prevail in the power scramble that was to ensue. However, Sheikh Abdul-Khalim Saydulayev, who acceded to the position of leader of the Chechen resistance movement was indeed a man of religion (unlike Maskhadov, who was a former Soviet colonel), but of the traditional variety.[19] His position on the character of the Chechen state was formulated, for example, by his participation in the debate between Ahmed Zakayev, the Chechen separatist government's foreign minister and proponent of the idea of a secular nation state, and Movladi Udugov, one of the main Chechen resistance's ideologists and founder of the main website of Caucasian *Jihadists* (*Kavkazcenter.org*), who promoted the idea of a united Islamic state in the North Caucasus. Responding to Udugov, Saydulayev stated that forming a Chechen nation state would not at all infringe on its Islamic

[19]'I have learned mainly from the teachings of Imam Shafi'i [a celebrated Sunni scholar of the eighth and ninth century]', Saydulayev maintained in an interview in *Chechnya Weekly*, 6 July 2006.

character.[20] In Saydulayev's vision, this nation state would become a part of the loose Islamic confederation of the North Caucasus, 'similar to the European Union'.[21] Such a position reflects both the intrinsic link between religion and the national identification of the North Caucasus societies, and the limited political objectives of the leading representatives of the Chechen resistance movement. Moreover, Saydulayev condemned all terrorist activities: '[Military targets, economic objectives and the state institutions of our enemies] are legal targets in any war. Of course, it is impermissible to make a target for attack of peaceable, defenseless people who are not engaged in the fight, let alone of women and children'.[22] The accidental death of Shamil Basayev a few weeks after Saydulayev was killed in Argun (2006) and succeeded by another moderate leader and a field commander Doku Umarov further weakened the '*Wahhabi*' faction of the Chechen resistance.

Several other important qualifications should be made. First, the intoxication of the Chechen resistance by the imported ideas from the Middle East has been a subject of constant criticism by the *majority* secular segment, as have been the terrorist attacks committed by the radicals. This is Maskhadov's reflection of the late 1990s, and his summary of his position towards the '*Wahhabi*':

> Even today I oppose all directions including *Wahhabism* that divide Muslims, my people, into two camps, giving our enemies the chance to provoke a fratricidal civil war. Even today I oppose the spreading of any ideology that is to be acceptable for my people. It is not necessary to teach us what kind of Muslims we are supposed to be; they should come here and learn, including the Arabs. Not even the Soviet empire dared to force Chechens to give up their religion. Not until after the first war did we hear the words '*Wahhabism*' or 'fundamentalism', and at the start of the second war we found that those who were spreading those ideas were in Russia and Dagestan. Their goal is to create dissension among Muslims and to provoke a civil war.[23]

Later, in 2002, Maskhadov addressed Chechen radicals in the aftermath of the Dubrovka incident as follows:

> I understand you, but I cannot support you. The Kremlin will take advantage of every opportunity to prove a connection between Chechens and international terrorism. Our job is not to give them pretexts, so that it would appear that they are right.[24]

The Chechen President missed no opportunity to rhetorically detach the resistance movement both from transnational terrorism and Middle Eastern or *al-Qaeda* links. When asked about the possible participation of *al-Qaeda* militants in the Chechen rebels' operations, he replied:

> I don't know. Maybe someone belonging to *al-Qaeda* has even got into Chechnya, but I have no idea what they would be doing here. We are fighting for our freedom without striving for any world domination. The United States is not our enemy.[25]

[20] *Chechnya Weekly*, 27 May 2006.
[21] *Chechnya Weekly*, 16 February 2006.
[22] *RFE/RL* interview, 4 June 2005.
[23] *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 28 February 2001.
[24] *Washington Post*, 29 December 2002.
[25] *Reuters*, 19 August 2004.

A few weeks later, during the Beslan siege, the Chechen resistance website carried the following message:

> There is not and there cannot be any justification for people who raise their hands against what is most holy to us—the lives of defenceless children. There are no words to express the full depth of our shock at what has happened ... We deeply regret that the repercussions of the inhumane war against Chechnya have come to our brother state Ossetia in such a tragic manner.[26]

Second, the '*Wahhabi*' segment of the Chechen resistance has always been a minority, with the political power they possessed stemming primarily from Shamil Basayev's individual authority and esteem among the Chechens. More importantly however, for many, including Basayev, talking about participation in the global *jihad* seems to have been a pragmatic instrument for securing resources and other support (for example, training skills) to fund their activities against the Russian government or improve their position in a continuous power scramble within the Chechen resistance movement. For Basayev, a close relationship with Emir Khattab seems to have been motivated by this purpose. Salman Raduyev's Islamist rhetoric was an instrument to challenge Maskhadov's position as the leader of Chechen resistance after Dudayev's death; a case very similar to Movladi Udugov, whose presidential race against Maskhadov in 1997 was probably funded by Saudi Arabian sources (Gall & de Waal 1997, p. 366). Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev's motivations seem to be complex and changing—from turning to *shari'a* as an institution to prevent state failure after the First Chechen War, to a 'strictly business' justification that 'Islamic fundamentalism is not dangerous. It's a partnership, international relations ... One cannot divide help into that from Wahhabis and help from others ...',[27] and then to a praising of the Dubrovka theatre's terrorists in 2002 followed by his resignation from the position of Maskhadov's personal envoy in the Middle East because of the latter's condemnation of the attack (Wilhelmsen 2004, pp. 12–27). (It can yet be suggested that Yandarbiyev was pursuing a personal political agenda by these statements and hoped for a return to the higher levels of Chechen politics.)

To conclude, the radicals' true intentions may in fact be as particularistic and limited as those of the secular segment, rather than universal as those of true global *jihadists*—even if in their geopolitical visions Basayev, Udugov, Raduyev and Yandarbiyev, and some moderates such as Saydulayev, had some sympathy for a North Caucasus Islamic confederation which would encompass Chechnya and Dagestan. The inflow of resources from the Middle East and Europe did influence the political situation in interwar Chechnya and contributed, together with the uncooperative stance of the Kremlin, to empowering radical dissent against the secular leadership embodied by Maskhadov and the emergence of internal conflict between the two branches of the resistance movement including armed clashes,

[26]http://www.chechenpress.co.uk/russian/news/2004/09/04/01.shtml, accessed 8 August 2005.
[27]*Vremya Novostei*, 17 December 2001, quoted in Wilhelmsen (2004, p. 24).

putsch and assassination attempts, and finally the founding of Islamist 'alternative polis'.[28]

Particularly since the late 1990s, the rhetoric of the more radical segment of the Chechen resistance has abounded in references to the global *jihad*, self-representations as *mujahideen* and martyrs, and some, for example, Emir Khattab, even occasionally referring to the common enemy of Islam, 'Jews and Crusaders'.[29] Udugov's *Kavkazcenter.org* betrays, besides its clear political programme, numerous traces of Islamic fundamentalism and adherence to the cult of *shahid*. Yet the rhetoric of Shamil Basayev as the leading figure of the '*Wahhabi*' segment was in fact much more ambivalent in respect to the idea of global *jihad*. With an exception of Udugov and former Chechen President Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev, who was assassinated by FSB agents in Qatar in 2004, the prominent figures of the Chechen resistance, whether belonging to either the secular or radical factions, resisted alienating the United States and the West. Instead, assuming a rather pragmatic perspective, these countries have been seen as a counterforce to Russia, even though the post-9/11 paradigm of the 'war on terror' caused dismay at the general change of foreign policy *vis-à-vis* Chechnya and the North Caucasus.

Seen in this light, notorious terrorist acts such as the Dubrovka theatre siege (2002), with their *kitsch* Islamist symbols and fierce fundamentalist statements by the terrorists, could be interpreted as cases of the communication function of terrorism, following Jenkins' assertion that in essence, 'terrorism is theater' (1985, p. 4) and '[for terrorists] the most significant technology is not weapons but direct communication with their multiple audiences' via the media (2006, p. 125). The audiences in the cases of those incidents, it may be assumed, were not only the Russian public and the Russian state as 'target audiences', but also the international public and the Middle Eastern sponsors of global *jihad*. The communication was ineffective on all levels—unlike in 1995 after the Budennovsk incident when the Russian government refused to negotiate with the terrorists, Islamist symbols alienated the public in the West, and it did not attract the much desired attention and support of the Middle Eastern sponsors. Alternatively, assuming a formal rationalist theory stance, the fanatic statements by Movsar Barayev and his accomplices in Dubrovka could be interpreted as a deliberate strategy of pretending irrationality, with the aim of deterring the opponent from storming the building in a classical 'game of chicken' (Nicholson 1992).

Thus, it can be suggested, the declared aims of Basayev's followers who organised and executed these attacks, despite the pervasive employment of Islamist symbols, were secular, limited and political, and particularistic, as opposed to the universalistic goals of the global *jihadists*. In the case of the Dubrovka theatre siege, the terrorists demanded an immediate cessation of hostilities and Russia's retreat from Ichkeria; the list of rather more refined demands presented by the group occupying Beslan school No. 1, signed by Shamil Basayev, included the withdrawal of Russian troops,

[28]Coerced by the circumstances, and according to some accounts, by the guns pointed at him by Basayev and Khattab (*Nezavysimaya gazeta*, 17 July 1999), Maskhadov finally significantly yielded to the demands of the radicals (Wilhelmsen 2004, pp. 57–58).

[29]*Terrorism Monitor*, 26 January 2006.

declaring Chechnya to be an independent state, its accession to the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), staying in the ruble zone and the engagement of international peacekeepers. Basayev and his fellow North Caucasus '*Wahhabi*' rebels seem not to have shared much either of *al-Qaeda*'s hatred for the United States or al-Zawahiri's grandiose visions of the defeat of the Russian Federation in the North Caucasus as a link in the causal chain of events leading to the eventual triumph of the global *jihad*. Their political projects have been essentially limited and political. The Russian Federation and Russian people have, moreover, not been represented as 'total enemies' in Schmitt's sense (2004), who should be eliminated; and the resort to terrorism, as argued in the last section, could be interpreted as a purely rational decision motivated by practical expediency rather than imported fanaticism. Basayev could refer to the Russian people at times as 'brothers', and the victimisation of primary targets of terrorist violence could be seen as a result of the vicious cycle of violence created by the war:

> I do not regret having occupied the school. That is because just 100 kilometres from the school, with the very active participation of Ossetia, a war is going on without any kind of rules and borders, the open genocide of the Chechen people is continuing, and in our country, just the dead up to 10 or 11 years of age number over 40,000.[30]

In a later statement he claimed:

> The citizens of Russia are accomplices in this war, even if they may not be carrying weapons. The only people that we regard as conciliatory are those who are not paying for this war through taxes, who are not taking part in it and who are actively coming out against it.[31]

Despite occasional self-identification with the worldwide *jihadi* movement, Basayev was reluctant to admit that a close link would exist between the Chechen rebels and the worldwide terrorist network, even to the radical media where such a statement could be instrumentally motivated. When asked by a journalist from a newly established *jihadi* magazine *Sawt al-Qoqaz* (*The Voice of the Caucasus*) 'Are you thinking of uniting ranks with *jihadi* groups abroad, for instance?' he chose to answer in rather vague terms:

> As regards the Chechen leadership this is an issue which has had its precedent, however it may be that other *jihadi* groups here in Chechnya have a particular opinion on that or a special arrangement. In any case we aim to unify the banner of the *mujahideen* but it may be that the time is not ripe yet for this . . .[32]

In the late 1990s, his profession of the '*Wahhabi*' credo was much more enthusiastic than in later years, namely after the 9/11 attacks, where the support from Middle Eastern sponsors would drain away. In an interview with Andrei Babitsky, Basayev admitted that he was a terrorist—a rare feature among those who are branded with

[30] *PrimaNews*, 1 November 2004. Basayev used a very similar argument during the Budennovsk attack in 1995: 'We will use the same methods as the federal forces in Chechnya use. Remember the hospital in Grozny, or the resident house in Shali' (*Segodnya*, 17 June 1995).

[31] *The Times*, 3 February 2005.

[32] *Terrorism Focus*, 12 December 2005.

this label today—but denied that he would be '*Wahhabi*' and maintained that the war in Chechnya is a war of national liberation, while religious aspects play a secondary role.[33]

To conclude, the internationalisation of the Chechen conflict since the mid-1990s has had the implication of importing human capital (*mujahideen*) and radical ideas from the Middle East and channelling funds from the sponsors of transnational terrorism. However, the extent of the human and material assistance can be considered to be rather limited, as is the level of favourable reception of '*Wahhabi*' ideas both by the societies of the North Caucasus and the Chechen rebels. The lukewarm local reaction to those imported ideas stems both from the differences in the indigenous tradition of local Islam and the global *jihadists* and their assertive missionary activities. Radicalisation, particularly during the course of the Second Chechen War, is on the rise in the North Caucasus, but only a small segment of local societies adheres to *Salafism*, and that arguably on a rather superficial level, as the global *jihadists* have not devised an elaborate theory and their theses are instead disseminated in the form of a few articles aimed at externalisation of the enemy 'other', and outlining a vision of alternative political order. The displayed adherence of most members of the Chechen resistance movement's radical segment to the ideas imported from the Middle East may be interpreted in instrumental and pragmatic terms, as their declared objectives, which are in essence limited and political, betray—notwithstanding their *jihadist* rhetoric and adopted Islamist symbols. '[The] struggle for power and the nature of Islam in the heartlands of Eurasia' as the 'latest chapter in the ''Great Game'' struggle for the soul of Central Asia and the Caucasus' (Williams 2003a, p. 3) has indeed been detectable in the North Caucasus, but the evidence that the global *jihadists* would prevail—as the Russian, and on occasions also the US government, together with the Islamists themselves, like to claim—is scant and invites deconstruction.

Chechens as members of a terrorist international

The lukewarm reaction of most Chechen resistance movement members to seeing their essentially national liberation war against Russia as only a link in the universal global *jihad*, and their preference instead to pursue limited and political aims in terms of a vision of a particular political order either in Chechnya, or in the North Caucasus, also translated in their reluctance to join the ranks of global *jihadi* internationals. In this section, attention is paid particularly to the Russian government's claims that the North Caucasus resistance movement members engage in subversive and terrorist activities around the world, which—it is suggested—are disseminated in order to support their representation as a universal threat.

Media reports both in Russia and in the West have indeed reported a 'Chechen' presence in conflict zones outside the North Caucasus, and even in the massacre in Andijan, Uzbekistan (2005). Whereas in the latter case, speculation may be raised whether the reports about militants allegedly speaking Chechen or Vaynakh could have been fabricated by the local authoritarian regime on Russia's demand, in Afghanistan it has been revealed that the ethnonym 'Chechen' has in fact been

[33] *Novaya gazeta*, 4 August 2005.

employed to describe almost all foreigners whose identity Afghans were unable to discover or whose language was incomprehensible (almost anyone but Pakistanis and Arabs). An element of genuine ignorance is therefore likely to play a role, too. 'We knew the Pakistanis [and Arabs] by their language, but we didn't understand the Chechens', the local people told Horak (2005, p. 123) in response to the question about the involvement of foreign elements in the conflict in 2002.[34]

Nevertheless, exceptions of Chechen resistance movement members' activities beyond the North Caucasus do exist. The most notorious instances are Shamil Basayev's hijacking of a Tu-154 plane *en route* to Ankara after a state of emergency had been declared by the Russian government in response to Dudayev's declaration of Chechen independence on 1 November 1991—followed by similar acts involving hijacking Russian domestic flights with international implications by other Chechen radicals[35]—and his role in the South Caucasus' Abkhaz conflict in 1992. Neither of these however, can yet be attributed to a *jihadi* character of the Chechen resistance movement. The interest of the global *jihadists* in the North Caucasus was aroused only in the mid-1990s. The *mujahideen*, such as Emir Khattab, most likely went to Chechnya and became involved in the war in 1995, but their number is difficult to estimate—particularly in the wake of the First Chechen War (1994–1996). More importantly, in the first case Basayev (and his followers) were clearly inspired by the 1970s hijacking campaign by the secular and Marxist PLO, which was rather successful in promoting their objectives by employing that terrorist tactic. Although the activities of the Chechen rebels in the South Caucasus may suggest an international character, they were framed under the general solidarity, shared history and identity of the various people of the Caucasus and institutionalised in the Confederation of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus. Basayev is reported to have visited Khost, Afghanistan—where he came into contact with Emir Khattab—twice in the early 1990s, yet these contacts *per se* do not seem to render him a global *jihadist* or challenge his view of the conflict in the North Caucasus—once it broke out—as a national liberation war.

Much discussed in Europe was the 'Chechen network', uncovered in December 2002, whose members had planned to plant an explosive at the Russian embassy in Paris. However, to call this group the 'Chechen network' was highly misleading. The detained persons, including their ring-leader Benahmed, were of Algerian nationality, and received support from *Groupe salafiste pour la prédication et le combat* (GSPC), which is a splinter faction of *Groupe islamique armée* (GIA) striving for the

[34]It is quite certain that some Chechens were in Afghanistan. A late reported case has been that of Ruslan Odizhev, killed in Nalchik (Kabardino-Balkariya) on 27 June 2007. Odizhev, who had been captured by US forces in Afghanistan and detained for several years at Guantánamo Bay, was subsequently released without charge. Following his death, he was referred to by the FSB as a participant in the Moscow and Volgodonsk apartment building bombings (1999) which immediately preceded the Second Chechen War, the Nalchik raid in 2005, and even as the 'spiritual leader' of Yarmuk *jamaat*, which operated from 2002 to 2005, which was during his detention at Guantánamo (*Chechnya Weekly*, 28 June 2007).

[35]A few similar attempts to repeat the scenario occurred in this period. In 2000, a plane *en route* from Makhachkala, Dagestan, to Moscow was hijacked and redirected to land in Israel. Unlike this incident however, the hijacking of a Tu-154 heading from Turkey to Russia, which was forced to land at Medina Airport, Saudi Arabia, ended with the storming of the plane and bloodshed the following year.

establishment of an Islamic state in Algeria,[36] and the only link to Chechnya was the previous presence of several of them in training camps in the North and South Caucasus (Pankisi Gorge) and Afghanistan. The selection of the target pointed to the possible assumption of the Chechen resistance's agenda. More plausibly, however, the group's activity may be broadly interpreted as the manifestation of the *jihad*'s 'globalisation', whereas the immediate cause could have been the Russian government's response to the Dubrovka attack occurring earlier that autumn (Nesser 2004, pp. 61–70). Given the nationality and global *jihadi* character of the conspirators, referring to the group as the 'Chechen network' seems to be entirely unsubstantiated.

The hijacking by Muhammet Tokcan and his commando group of a Turkish ferry, *Avrasya*, heading from Istanbul to Sochi in 1996 and the siege of the Swisshotel in Istanbul in 2001 should also not be interpreted as acts of Chechen terrorism exported abroad, although inspired by the Chechen cause and carried out by the resistance movement's sympathisers. Tokcan was himself a Turkish citizen of Chechen descent, who chose different means to further the Chechen (secular) cause than many of his kind who took part in the conflict in the North Caucasus.[37] It may be concluded therefore that the association of the Chechen rebels with the global *jihadi* internationals occurred mainly on the rhetorical level, and the real extent of Chechen participation in guerrilla and terrorist activities abroad remains highly dubious.

Blood feud as a cause of the conflict regionalisation

Since doubt has been cast above on the narratives of the internationalisation of the Chechen resistance as a root cause of its radicalisation and the depiction of the North Caucasus as a battlefield of the global *jihad*, a regional narrative may be proposed instead. This is based on the custom of blood feud as an important factor explaining the spread of the conflict into the adjacent areas of the North Caucasus. To fully understand the causes and the nature of the current resistance both in Chechnya and—broadly speaking—in nearly all of the North Caucasus, it is necessary to take into consideration many specific local circumstances. Although for the majority of Caucasian ethnic groups, the custom of blood feud has become a thing of the past thanks to societal developments of recent decades, in the mountainous areas of Dagestan and the North Caucasian republics, as well as nearly everywhere in Chechnya and Ingushetia, the custom of blood feud persists in various forms (Souleimanov 2007, pp. 26–30).

The custom of blood feud is closely tied to consciousness of collective responsibility; some North Caucasian societies are still based on clans. In those societies, a person is not perceived as an autonomous unit, but far more as a part of a broader familial or clan-based entity. Blood feuds apply to cases of murder, injury resulting in death, rape or so-called blood insults or deadly insults.[38] Inability to avenge oneself adequately is

[36]Benahmed himself used to be *emir* (commander) of GIA, and a personal friend to Abu Musab al-Zarkawi, whom he met in Afghanistan. He seems to be a true globetrotting *mujadid* with numerous contacts in the global *jihad* movement (Nesser 2004, pp. 63–64).

[37]Tokcan had, however, reportedly fought in the South Caucasus, in Shamil Basayev's Abkhaz battalion in 1993.

[38]Traditionally, a wide range of acts may be understood as a so-called deadly insult leading to a blood feud. Such acts, violating the principles of local (mountain) etiquette, may be verbal

regarded as a sign of weakness, not only of an individual, but of the whole clan, contributing to the dishonouring of both the individual and the entire clan in the eyes of their compatriots. Traditionally, revenge has applied to a male member of the family on the father's side, especially brothers, then fathers, sons and cousins to a lesser extent. This custom is most widespread in backward, isolated areas high in the mountains of the northeast Caucasus, where the influence of Islam—as well as of *adat*—has traditionally been quite strong. This leads to a widening circle of people who are drawn into the cycle of violence, regardless of what the original cause was. This is a further reason why the present insurgency in the North Caucasus, especially in isolated, mountain areas that historically represented the core of the resistance and where waging the struggle is easier, reflects the tight intertwining of Islam and customary law. This is shown by the fact that the vast majority of the armed groups operating in Dagestan (such as the *Botlikh Jamaat* and *Shari'a Jamaat*) come from the upper reaches of Dagestan, and that even in the north-western Caucasus, the core of the resistance consists of members of the Karachay and Balkar nationalities.[39] Similarly, the Chechen resistance has traditionally relied on the mountainous area of Ichkeria.

We also find certain similarities when analysing the situation in the neighbouring North Caucasian republics. In Ingushetia, the population of which is both ethnically and linguistically related to the Chechens, the situation began to worsen after President General Ruslan Aushev, who effectively foiled the efforts of both the Chechen separatists and the Russian generals to draw the republic into the warfare, was replaced as president there. In 2002, his position was filled by Putin's colleague from the FSB, Murat Zyazikov, whose loyalty to the Kremlin was beyond question. Zyazikov consented to the stationing of Russian troops in the republic; before long, security procedures that had been routine in Chechnya started being practised in Ingushetia as well—whether by the Russian or Ingush police or by secret service agents.[40] The result was the heretofore unparalleled radicalisation of some Ingushetia youth and their solidarity with the Chechen resistance; one of the consequences was the massive attack by fighters of the so-called Ingush *Jamaat* on the Ingush town of Nazran (June 2004), which cost the lives of about 80 police officers, mostly of Ingush nationality. An analogous situation has existed since the late 1990s in Dagestan, where a sort of 'quiet war' continues between the members of the *jamaats* and the police and army; the intensity of fighting there is comparable to if not greater than that seen in Chechnya.[41]

(and publicly expressed) insults of parents or female relatives or (brutal) beatings. While the custom of blood feud does not apply today to the extent that it did 100 years ago or more, relics of the practice in one form or another persist in the region to this day. In mountainous Dagestan and especially in Ingushetia and Chechnya, blood feud exists in a form that remains virtually unchanged.

[39]It was the Turkic population of the north-western Caucasus inhabiting the nearly inaccessible mountain areas that recently made up the majority in the Yarmuk *Jamaat*, the activity of which is noted below.

[40]See Joint Statement by Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture, and (a Russian organisation for the protection of human rights) Memorial, 8 April 2004, available at: http://hrw.org/english/docs/2004/04/07/russia8408.htm, accessed 10 July 2007.

[41]*Jamaats* in the mountainous Caucasus were originally a part of long-established local traditions. This originally Arab word was revived mainly in Dagestan to designate communities that united the male population of the *auls* (mountain villages) for the purpose of the common defence of land, shared

Until recently, it seemed that events in the eastern part of the North Caucasus would not influence developments in the ethnic republics in the western part (Kabardino-Balkariya, Karachayevo-Cherkesiya, Adygeya), which have had a somewhat different cultural and historical development and which now have a sizeable admixture of Russian inhabitants. Also here, however, the terrorist attacks in the Russian interior were interpreted by the army and police as *carte blanche* for a sort of prophylactic *zachistka* of the *jamaats*; practising Muslims suffered ever more frequent repression; uniformly labelled as '*Wahhabi*', they were arrested *en masse* by the police and FSB and were subjected to brutal interrogations and humiliation. Those who obeyed the tenets of Islam were fired from their jobs and mosques were closed.[42]

In reaction to repression by state authorities, however, the *jamaats* there have also begun to radicalise (although they are far from limited to a *jihadist* orientation). Other causes of an internal nature are the massive, chronically unresolved social and economic problems, poverty, corruption of the local elite and the 'state-sanctioned' religious leadership, dissatisfaction with Russian domination and 'Russification' that is often identified with the general decline of morality in society. A clear illustration of this was the founding in 2002 of the so-called Yarmuk, an extremist group that split off from an originally moderate *jamaat* in Kabardino-Balkariya that was founded in the early 1990s and oriented mainly towards official circles.[43] Yarmuk, on the other hand, is striving to 'save Islam', to fight against a 'mercenary' and 'godless' regime, and it has not hesitated to take up arms—in cooperation with the Chechen resistance. The most notorious attack so far by this group was on Nalchik, the capital of Kabardino-Balkariya, which took hundreds of lives. Moreover, the case of Yarmuk is far from isolated (McGregor 2005).

Just as in Chechnya, also in the rest of the North Caucasus, individuals seeking vengeance may join in groups to strengthen their striking power and to achieve their desired goal; thus their actions are not always determined on ideological grounds. In this context, membership in *jamaats* or close cooperation with them would represent a desirable alternative to acting as a solitary, 'lone-wolf' avenger; someone alone embroiled in a (blood) feud with powerful enemies would have difficulty surviving,

agricultural work and military training, as well as activities related to religion. Over the centuries these village communities came under the strong influence of Islamic mysticism. They existed more or less illegally during the Soviet domination, and they did not become legal until Gorbachev's *perestroika* in the latter half of the 1980s, when they were viewed as the revival of a local tradition. Although it cannot be denied that since the 1980s and especially the 1990s, many *Jamaats* have come under the influence of *Wahhabite* or *Salafi* Islam, in the great majority of cases the *Jamaats* have remained faithful to Sufism. To this day, the function of the *Jamaats* has never been limited to the sphere of orthodox religious practice, and their blanket identification with Islam is misleading since, as we have seen, they have served and still serve as a synonym for the village (male) community and the efforts of the mountain people to provide each other with support and solidarity under the harsh conditions high in the mountains.

[42]See the report by Memorial, 'Conflict Spill-Over Outside the Chechen Republic in 2004–2005 (Ingushetia and Kabardino-Balkariya)', available at: http://www.memo.ru/hr/hotpoints/caucas1/msg/2006/03/m53212.htm, accessed 2 March 2006.

[43]For example, it helped young people overcome difficult personal problems (alcoholism, drug addiction) and was involved in benevolent activities, dialogue with older generations of the Muslim public and also in the joint resistance against racketeering in the economy and dishonest business practices.

let alone achieving desired vengeance. In truth, in a society where the laws of the blood feud still apply and the principle of collective responsibility is applied both by the state and by those struggling against it, conflict is sure to spread like wildfire; the slogan is: 'If you insult my brother (father, son, mother, sister, grandfather, uncle or cousin)—whether or not a member of a *jamaat* is involved—I will avenge myself on you and your relatives and comrades at any cost'.

This alternative narrative of the motivational patterns of the North Caucasus' insurgents does not, however, exclude the possibility that the worldview of individual (not necessarily ideologically or politically motivated) avengers will be influenced over time by the ideology of militant Islam with regional, if not worldwide objectives. In fact, in combination with the pace of the conflict's spread, this may represent a very dangerous combination that could seriously destabilise the North Caucasus for several years.

Conclusion

This article has offered a critical reading of representations of conflict in the North Caucasus as a battlefield of the global *jihad*, pointing to political motives behind such a rhetorical action. For the Russian government these political motives included a striving for legitimation of its repressive policies in the North Caucasus, suppression of dissent, and an assertion of the identity-building process. On the part of the resistance movement, on the other hand, their self-representation as members of the global *jihadist* international has been an instrument in their internal struggles and a means—at least before the 9/11 attacks and the Afghanistan and Iraq campaigns—to secure support in terms of human and material capital from the Middle East.

An alternative narrative focusing on the spread of the blood feud has been proposed, arguing that it is necessary to differentiate between the radicalisation of the resistance as such and the strengthening of the ideology of regional *jihad*, tied with it, nonetheless, in some ways. Radicalisation comes from the grassroots level as an effort to carry out a (blood) feud by those who feel themselves directly or indirectly affected by the actions of federal forces of the (pro-Moscow) local political and military structures. In the North Caucasus, there has occurred over time a mutual intertwining of these two elements, of (regional) *jihadist* ideology and the mechanism of blood feud, which has resulted in an escalation and an expanding circle of persons involved. One may consider the blood feud as a specific means of mobilisation for this region, while local *jihadism* plays the role of a (supranational) ideology of the resistance. Important in this context is the turnover of generations, an especially sensitive issue in Chechnya. It is the young people in particular who are drawn into the cycle of violence, as they are the ones who are physically able to avenge a murdered father or brother, a raped mother or sister, bombed villages. Revenge, moreover, has been and remains the domain of younger men. The new 'war generation' was not raised in the established traditions in these regions of traditionalist Sufi Islam and is thus more susceptible to absorbing the extremist ideologies of *jihad*—whether global or regional.

There is strong awareness in the region of the common—supranational—and at times quite successful history of resistance offered against nineteenth-century Russian colonisation by several North Caucasian nations. That resistance had been conducted

under the green standard of Islam. Also, in view of the fact that the ideas of global *jihad* still have not been revived in the North Caucasus and that support from Islamist (*Salafi*) funds and individuals fell off sharply after the 9/11 attacks, it may be expected that the resistance will continue to spread, yet in regional rather than international terms. That is because rather than vague ideas of global *jihad*, the resistance in the North Caucasus is far more driven by the ideas of North Caucasian, mountain dweller Muslim solidarity and the necessity of a joint struggle in the name of a common religion (Islam) and the liberation of holy ground from the yoke of the 'infidels'.

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