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# 17. The glitter and poverty of Chechen Islam

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## I. Introduction

Originally the separatist movement in Chechnya was unrelated to Islam. Its ideology was ethnic nationalism and its goal was the establishment of an independent national state. The Chechen separatists' social base was limited: far from all members of Chechen society supported the idea of independence. Nor, it seems, did the leaders of the Chechen insurgents seriously believe that it was possible for Chechnya to attain true independence. The future president of the self-proclaimed Chechen Republic of Ichkeriya, Soviet Air Force Major-General Dzhokhar Dudayev, used to say that after Chechnya gained independence it would join the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and preserve its close economic and political ties with Russia.

Before the beginning of the armed struggle for independence the Chechens aimed at maximum autonomy within the Russian Federation. The strategic tasks which the Chechen leaders set themselves were largely similar to those pursued, and realized for a period of time, by the ethno-political elite of Tatarstan.<sup>1</sup> In Chechnya, for a number of reasons (which are not the subject of the present study), the conflict between the centre and Grozny followed a different path—that of military–political confrontation, in which Islam became one of the main ideological and political vectors.

In the Russian scholarly literature and other publications much has been written about the important role of Islam in the events of the 1990s in Chechnya. The more convincing work is that of Vakhid Akaev (a Chechen researcher),<sup>2</sup> Alexei Kudryavtsev and Vladimir Bobrovnikov (two orientalists based in Moscow), and the journalist experts Ilya Maksakov and Igor Rotar.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In 1993 only 2 republics—Tatarstan and Chechnya—refused to sign the Federation Treaty. Later, in 1994, Tatarstan did sign an agreement with Moscow under which it received broad economic and even political autonomy. However, after the new Russian President, Vladimir Putin, restored the 'vertical line of power' Tatarstan's gains from the agreement were considerably reduced.

<sup>2</sup> Akaev, V., 'Chechnya: vozmozhen li afganskiy variant?' [Chechnya: is the Afghan variant possible?], *Central Asia and the Caucasus* (Luleå), no. 2 (1999); Akayev, V., 'Sufizm i vahhabizm na Severnom Kavkaze: issledovaniya po prikladnoy i neotlozhnoy etnologii' [Sufism and Wahhabism in the North Caucasus: studies in applied and actual ethnology], *Research in Applied and Actual Ethnology*, no. 127 (Russian Academy of Sciences, Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology: Moscow, 1999); and Akayev, V., *Sheikh Kunta-Hadji: Zhizn' i Ucheniye* [Sheikh Kunta-Hadji: his life and teaching] (Grozny, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> Among their publications on Chechnya are: Maksakov, I., 'Chto ozhidayet Chechnyu v novom godu' [What awaits Chechnya in the new year], *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 27 Dec. 2000; Maksakov, I., 'Chechenskiy sled' v terraktakh podtverzhdayetsya' ['Chechen hand' in terrorist acts confirmed], *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 28 Mar. 2001; Kudryavtsev, A., 'Islam i gosudarstvo v Chechenskoj respublike' [Islam and the state in the Chechen Republic], *Vostok*, no. 3 (1004), pp. 64–70; Kudryavtsev, A., 'Wahhabism: religious extremism in the northern Caucasus', *Central Asia and the Caucasus* (Luleå), no. 3 (2000); Bobrovnikov, V., 'Collective farm as a form of Islamic order in Muslim societies' in *Notions of*

Many of these interesting publications were prepared during the period when combat operations were going on in Chechnya, future relations between Moscow and Grozny were uncertain and it was not possible to draw far-reaching conclusions concerning the internal situation in Chechnya. Now that the large-scale operations there are over and attempts have been started to form a civil administration a whole stage has been completed and it is possible to evaluate its results. It is in this context that it is worthwhile to analyse the influence of the Islamic factor on events in Chechnya.

## II. The influence of Islam on events in Chechnya

Islam has always been an ideology against Russian expansion in the North Caucasus. This was clear in particular in the 18th and 19th centuries when Russian expansion in the region was at its most intensive.<sup>4</sup> Chechnya offered especially stubborn resistance, conducted under religious slogans, to the Russian conquerors who, justifying their expansion, also used religious arguments relating to the Orthodox faith.

At the same time, the idea of jihad—holy war—in Chechnya and the rest of the North Caucasus went hand in hand with another, less popular idea, which tended to disunite the local Muslims rather than to consolidate their forces—that of establishing an Islamic state. Among the Chechens the most ardent supporter of this idea was Sheikh Mansur who, in pursuing his ends, destroyed whole villages which dared to disobey him.<sup>5</sup> In the opinion of the supporters of the Islamic state idea, only such a state could successfully oppose the Russian onslaught.

Islam was one of the factors which facilitated the formation of relations between Russia and the Caucasian peoples, including the Chechens. The Soviet period was no exception here. In relations between the communist government and the Chechens, Islam continued to play its peculiar, sometimes contradictory, part: at times the government flirted with the Muslims, pitting them against the anti-Soviet Cossack movement (as in the 1920s) and permitting, sometimes encouraging, the use of Islamic traditions, including Islamic legislation; at other times it declared Islam its enemy and destroyed mosques (in the 1930s and the 1980s). The religious ‘thaw’ of the 1940s, which started during the war years, had comparatively little effect on the Muslims of the Caucasus, especially the Chechens, Karachais and Balkars. Some of them collaborated with the Germans, and because of that entire peoples were later deported.

*Law and Order in Muslim Societies*, Papers of the Summer Academy of the Working Group on ‘Modernity and Islam’, Casablanca, 1999, pp. 25–40; and Rotar, I., *Islam i Voyna* [Islam and war] (AIRO-XX: Moscow, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Gammer, M., *Shamil: Musul'manskoye Soprotivleniye Tsarizmu: Zavoyevaniye Chechni i Dagestana* [Shamil: Muslim resistance to tsarism: the conquest of Chechnya and Dagestan] (Kron Press: Moscow, 1998).

<sup>5</sup> Sheikh Mansur (his original name was Ushurma) was born in 1760. He became the first imam in the North Caucasus and promoted the Islamization of the local population. He was captured by Russian troops in 1791 and died in incarceration.

During World War II the German occupation forces tried, not without success, to play the Islamic card by encouraging the work of the Muslim clergy, opening the mosques which had been closed by the Soviet authorities and demonstrating their respect for Islam and its believers. The Germans reactivated the slogan of anti-Russian (anti-Soviet) jihad—which was not difficult. Writing about the anti-Soviet rebellions which erupted in the North Caucasus periodically before the war, Abdurrahman Avtorkhanov, a Chechen journalist, notes that ‘whereas it is difficult to establish any organizational links between those rebellions, the national–ideological links between them are perfectly clear: they were provoked by the calls for jihad issued by the founders of the idea of independence for the mountain peoples—Mansur, Gamzat-Bek, Kazimulla and Shamil’.<sup>6</sup> The last Chechen armed insurrection, led by Hasan Israilov, was put down in the spring of 1940. (In 1995 the present author was told in Grozny that the last Chechen rebel was arrested by the authorities in 1972.)

Nevertheless, there is no direct connection between the 19th- and 20th-century jihad (let alone attempts to establish an Islamic state) and the Chechen separatist movement of the 1990s. Things are more complex than they seem. The continuance of the Islamic tradition was interrupted by the deportations of 1944 and the dispersal of the Chechens across the vast expanses of the USSR. As a result of that dispersal the influence of Islam on their minds and behaviour was considerably reduced. Unlike their ethnic mountain peoples’ solidarity, Islam was not a decisive factor for the Chechens’ survival in an alien environment. Much more effective was their adherence to national traditions, such as the custom of burying their dead at all costs in their native land.<sup>7</sup>

The Chechen diaspora—the Chechens who later, in the 1950s, returned—were largely indifferent towards Islam. To them it was, above all, a component part of an ethnic culture many elements of which were in contradiction with ‘orthodox’ Islam. Lately, Chechen Islam has regressed towards its 18th-century form, when it was a syncretist religious culture with rudiments of idolatry and absolute domination of customary law, *adat*, over shariah, the Islamic canon law. In other words, the Chechen Islam of the late 20th century has to a certain extent been reconstituted into the variety which was opposed by Sheikh Mansur.

As a result, Islam in Chechnya, particularly among the Chechen diaspora, found itself on the periphery of the Chechens’ social consciousness and was not in demand at first as an ideological model of Chechen separatism. So, in the Islamic tradition of the Chechen society, to use a well-known expression, ‘the time was out of joint’.

Why, then, was Islam once again ‘in demand’ in Chechnya and why did it even claim (unsuccessfully, as it turned out) the role of a dominant ideological model in the Chechen consciousness and even a factor of state development?

<sup>6</sup> Uralov, A. (pen name of Abdurrahman Avtorkhanov), *Narodo-Ubiystvo v SSSR* [The murder of peoples in the USSR] (Moscow, 1991), p. 24.

<sup>7</sup> Private communications of the author with Chechen colleagues.

In the first place, the Chechen conflict began amid a general 'Islamic renaissance' on the territory of the former USSR, including Russia. In the North Caucasus this process was particularly vigorous in Dagestan and Chechnya.<sup>8</sup> The Islamic rebirth facilitated the regeneration of the Chechens' historical memory in which jihad (*gazavat*) figured prominently. It revived in people's minds a sense of dignity, pride and belief in their ability to oppose any external enemy. It would be fair to say that the early 1990s were a brief period of emotional religious euphoria which was capitalized on by the then Chechen politicians, and above all by General Dzhokhar Dudayev, the first president of the self-proclaimed Chechen Republic, who at first had no intention of appealing to Islam for political purposes.

In the second place, if Moscow had not set out to suppress the Chechen separatists by military methods (whether this was justified or not) the Chechen Islamic rebirth would not have taken such radical, even extremist forms. It was only when the conflict between Moscow and Grozny became a military confrontation that the Islamic rebirth in Chechnya assumed the form of jihad. 'Russia . . . forced us to enter on the path of Islam, although we were not prepared well enough to accept the Islamic values', Dudayev said in 1996.<sup>9</sup>

The transformation of religious renaissance into a holy war made Islam one of the key factors in the Chechen conflict, as well as in the overall situation in the North Caucasus. Only after that did outside influence from radical Islamic organizations as well as certain Muslim states begin to be felt. (Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Syria and Turkey are the countries most often named in this connection. This overlooks the fact that initially this outside influence was generated by Chechen rather than Islamic solidarity, since there is a united and influential Chechen diaspora in those countries.)

### III. The aims of the Chechen leaders in appealing to Islam

Dudayev and his associates were forced to turn to religion for their political purposes. Neither Dudayev nor his associates envisaged the consequences of this move, which, following Dudayev's death in 1996, led to a split in the Chechen society and its military-political leadership.

Of course, even before Dudayev turned to Islam there were in Chechnya various Islamic groups which called themselves Salafites and worked to spread 'pure' Islam, in contrast with traditional Caucasian Islam.<sup>10</sup> There also appeared in Chechnya a branch of the Islamic Rebirth Party (IRP), based on a quasi-Salafite ideology and headed by Islam Khalimov, who soon became one of Dudayev's advisers. Salafite preachers were active in Chechnya. However, compared with neighbouring Dagestan, their success in Chechnya was not significant. In Chechnya (as well as in the neighbouring republics of the North

<sup>8</sup> Malashenko, A. V., *Islamskoye Vozrozhdeniye v Sovremennoy Rossii* [Renaissance of Islam in modern Russia] (Moskovskiy Tsentr Karnegi: Moscow, 1998).

<sup>9</sup> 'Terms of war and peace', *Time*, Mar. 1996, p. 19.

<sup>10</sup> The Salafites are known as Wahhabites in Russia. The terms are used interchangeably here.

Caucasus) ‘the IRP failed to become a fully-fledged opposition party. It refrained from any serious political actions and actually limited itself to “educational activity”, that is, propaganda for pure Islam’.<sup>11</sup>

The majority of Chechen Muslims remained either indifferent to religion or oriented towards Tarikatism, a variety of Islam traditional for the Chechens. The Naqshbandi and Kadiri tarikats (brotherhoods) were active in the republic. Their members were the followers of Sheikh Kunta-Hadji.<sup>12</sup> Although the Kadirites competed among themselves, they were in a stable state of agreement.

In the form in which it existed in Chechnya, Tarikite Islam was not very suitable as a militant ideology, as a factor that would help to consolidate the society and its political forces for organizing resistance to the Russian centre. Nor could the religious authorities, whose prestige among the public was very limited, call for unity in the struggle against Moscow. In fact, the institutional clergy was dependent on secular politicians and played no role of its own.

The initiative of turning to Islam as an ideological and political means of struggle could only be taken by influential secular politicians in the pursuit of concrete pragmatic aims. In implementing those aims religion was expected to play an important but purely instrumental role. Symbolically, Dudayev did not consider himself an ardent Muslim believer. In fact, he could not have been one because of his upbringing, way of life and professional occupation. It is true that in one interview he asserted that he was ‘a profoundly religious person from childhood’,<sup>13</sup> but it is well known that people with a Muslim background seldom risk admitting to atheistic convictions publicly. (It will for ever remain a mystery what transformations took place in Dudayev’s mind after his proclamation of jihad.)

In other words, the decision to proclaim jihad was made by Dudayev himself, and this could not have been otherwise, even if formally it was announced by others, including clergymen. Relevant in this connection is Decree no. 2, which was signed by Dudayev in November 1991 and which contained an appeal to all Muslims living in Moscow ‘to turn Moscow into a disaster zone in the name of our freedom from kufr’.<sup>14</sup> Although the word ‘jihad’ is never mentioned in the text of the decree, its phraseology and rhetoric show that Dudayev was determined to make use of the religious factor.

As time went on, Dudayev and his associates became convinced that jihad was the most effective ideology in the Chechens’ struggle for independence and that appeals for a holy war were capable of uniting the nation and raising the people’s fighting spirit.

<sup>11</sup> Kudryavtsev, A. V., “‘Vahhabizm’: Problemy religioznogo ekstremizma na Severnom Kavkaze” [Wahhabism: problems of religious extremism in the North Caucasus], *Central Asia and the Caucasus* (Luleå), no. 9 (2000), p. 116.

<sup>12</sup> Sheikh Kunta-Hadji (Kishiev), 1830(?)–67, was one of the most prominent Chechen religious authorities whose followers are still influential in Chechnya. See also *Sheikh Kunta-Hadji: Zhizn’ i Ucheniye* (note 2).

<sup>13</sup> Quoted from *Ternisty Put’ k Svobode* [A thorny path to freedom] (Grozny, 1992), p. 50.

<sup>14</sup> *Sbornik Ukazov Prezidenta Chechenskoy Respubliki s 1 noyabrya 1991 goda po 30 iunya 1992 goda* [Collection of decrees by the President of the Chechen Republic from 1 November 1991 to 30 June 1992] (Grozny, 1992), p. 4.

For the Chechen military–political elite, jihad was a convenient justification of its actions since it gave them a sacral sanction: the struggle for independence was identified with a holy war. Thus the conflict took on a double identity—both national and religious. In an interview given in 1998 the Mufti of Chechnya, Akhmed-Hadji Kadyrov (a sworn enemy of Wahhabism—a term used for the fundamentalists in the Russian mass media) said that ‘the Chechen resistance movement should be regarded as religious, in the first place, and as nationalist, in the second’.<sup>15</sup>

Jihad was associated with Islamic ‘renaissance’. The well-known Chechen politician Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev, who was Chechen President for a few months after Dudayev’s death, seems to have been right in saying that the process of Islamic rebirth in Chechnya ‘is best described as *gazavat* or jihad’.<sup>16</sup> At any rate, such an assessment is quite applicable to the first half of the 1990s.

On the whole the use of the *gazavat* slogan proved quite productive for the Chechen resistance movement. Of course, it was not the Islamic ideology itself that ensured the Chechens’ military successes against the Russian troops—there were many political and purely military reasons for that—but the jihad slogan had a definite mobilizing effect and boosted the fighting spirit of the Chechen militants, particularly among the young. The proclamation of jihad also to some extent promoted the internationalization of the conflict, encouraging religious fanatics from other Muslim countries to take part and enlisting the help of various Islamic organizations. In other words, thanks to the proclamation of jihad, the Chechens managed to activate the mechanism of Islamic solidarity. If this did not decide the outcome of military operations, it did enable the Chechens not to feel isolated from their fellow believers in the rest of the world.

However, the Chechen jihad received no serious support from Russia’s Muslim community, most of which, including the political elites and leading clergy, regarded the Chechens’ actions with apprehension and even disapproval, fearing quite justly that the Chechen conflict might result in an even more negative attitude among society towards Muslims and Islam in general. Ruslan Aushev, the President of Ingushetia, which has a common border with Chechnya, was the exception. His ‘sympathies’ for the Chechens, however, were due partly to his reluctance to prejudice Ingushetia’s relations with its unpredictable neighbour and partly to the fact that from time to time Moscow used him as an unofficial go-between in its contacts with the separatists.

Some radical groups in Tatarstan and Bashkortostan did declare their solidarity with the Chechens and even sent some Muslim volunteers to the Chechen front. These actions, however, were of very limited scope and were resolutely checked by the Russian special services.

Thus, the Chechen separatist movement for the most part took the form of a jihad, which on the one hand was beneficial to it both internally and externally but on the other failed to prevent internecine wars inside Chechnya itself in the mid-1990s.

<sup>15</sup> Rotar (note 3).

<sup>16</sup> *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 20 Dec. 1996, p. 3.

The proclamation of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeriya, an Islamic state, was intended to be the finishing touch of the Chechen resistance movement in the form of a jihad. This idea was first voiced back in 1991 at the Second National Congress of the Chechen People. The documents of that congress stressed that an independent Chechen state must be an Islamic one. At the time, however, this idea was not developed further, perhaps because Dudayev himself held an entirely different view: he insisted that the Chechen republic should be 'a constitutional secular state'.<sup>17</sup> It is conceivable that Dudayev (who, despite the constantly growing ambitions of his associates, remained the leader of fighting Chechnya) was the chief obstacle to the establishment of an Islamic state. After its proclamation he would inevitably have to share power with someone else: being a national leader, he could hardly become a religious one as well. The establishment of an Islamic state would certainly require the formation of new autonomous structures, independent of the president, which would be headed by other people. The idea of national power might enter into contradiction with the idea of religious power.

However, 'great people know when to die', and Dudayev departed this life a national leader, never witnessing the fierce confrontation within the anti-Russian opposition.

The separatists subsequently split, mainly because of personal ambitions, an intention to be more respected by Moscow and lack of ideological integrity. More significant, however, is the part Islam played in shaping the internal political situation, especially during the attempt to establish a national state.

The reason why the Chechen politicians turned to Islam in the second half of the 1990s is formally consonant with the reason why this was done under Dudayev, but there is an essential difference.

Jihad was supposed to consolidate the Chechen nation in the face of the external enemy, and it did meet with a response and promote national consolidation in the face of external danger. The aim of the introduction of the shariah criminal code in 1996 was to establish order in the society, to create a basis for regulating the relations between the various groups of the population and to stem the growth of crime, but the introduction of shariah rather split the society into supporters and opponents of forced Islamization. Furthermore, whereas for some politicians the establishment of shariah was both an end and a means towards taking the next step—proclaiming an Islamic state in Chechnya—for others it was a forced move.

The idea of progressing towards an Islamic state was upheld by the Salafites. They advocated the priority of Islamic values over all others, including ethnic ones, the 'purging' of Islam of all pagan elements and the introduction of strict behavioural customs such as prayer five times a day and refusal of alcohol. They also rejected democracy as being alien to the Muslims. This paradigm of values is typically fundamentalist (described by the Arab term *usuliya*, a derivative of *usul ad-din*—the roots of faith) and is practically identical with

<sup>17</sup> *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, 12 Aug. 1992.

the requirements of fundamentalism in the Middle East and other parts of the Muslim world. (The advocates of such requirements prefer not to call themselves fundamentalists or Wahhabites and not even Salafites, but simply Muslims, implying that only they can be regarded as true believers.)

The question who in Chechnya (and elsewhere) can be considered a Salafite remains an open one. Some researchers and journalists believe that a Salafite is a person who knows Arabic, is familiar with the appropriate philosophy, has the necessary theological knowledge and is capable of arguing his position. On this view, no 'true' Salafites will be found in Chechnya or in the whole North Caucasus, where in the years of Soviet government high Muslim culture was almost completely destroyed, along with its bearers, the ulemas and other Muslim intellectuals. Others (including the present author) believe that all those who more or less share the principles of Islamic rebirth and are prepared to uphold them in practice in the present-day situation in Chechnya may be regarded as Salafites. Strictly speaking the term 'Salafite' is not applicable to people who finished Soviet schools and colleges, who have no regular religious education and whose knowledge of Arabic is poor or non-existent. They may be properly described as 'quasi-Salafites' or 'Salafitic Muslims'. By their practical actions, however, they strive to attain the aims contained in the philosophy of Salafiya. Thus such different people as Bagautdin Muhammad, an ideologist and preacher of Salafism, who is well known throughout the Caucasus and was invited by Yandarbiyev to Chechnya from Dagestan in 1997, Shamil Basayev, who carried out acts of terrorism and who held the post of Vice-Premier from 1996, and a rank-and-file Islamic militant who is unable to read the inscription in Arabic on the band round his head but is prepared to fight for the establishment of an Islamic state, all fall within the category of Salafites.

At any rate, it was this Salafite public which consciously supported the idea of rebuilding the Chechen state on an Islamic basis.

Of course, it should be borne in mind that quite often Islamic rhetoric conceals personal ambitions and that to many Chechen Salafites Islam has been primarily an instrument for attaining their selfish ends. However, once these people had adopted Islam as a weapon in their struggle, they all became hostages to religion, and once they summoned the name of Allah they could no longer depart from the chosen path without the risk of being accused of betrayal of the faith and losing their prestige for ever.<sup>18</sup>

Finally, it should be remembered that the spread of Salafism has been facilitated by the ever more active penetration into Chechnya of foreign Muslims, above all ethnic Chechens and Arabs from the Middle East. An example of this is the activity of Fatkha ash-Shashani, who returned to his historic homeland and not only headed an Islamic battalion called Dzhamaat but also did all he could to spread the idea of establishing an Islamic state in Chechnya. It was in

<sup>18</sup> It was certainly no accident that, realizing the futility of the struggle for an Islamic state in Chechnya, Shamil Basayev declared in Oct. 2000, at a moment when Palestinian-Israeli relations were seriously deteriorating, his readiness to send 150 fighters to support the Palestinians. Thereby he reminded the world once again that he was an Islamic politician who remained loyal to the principle of religious solidarity.



this battalion that Khattab (whose real name is Habib Abd ar-Rakhman), the most abhorrent foreign field commander in Chechnya, perfected his fighting skills. He is also a consistent proponent of the Islamic state idea.

After the shariah criminal code was introduced a corresponding shariah judicial system was instituted—‘in rough form’ as yet. The following two years saw a struggle for the establishment of an Islamic state. At the end of that struggle, in February 1999, full shariah rule was introduced, which was tantamount to the proclamation of an Islamic state. The fact that such the process took so long seems to indicate that the decision was not based on the wholehearted approval of the whole of Chechen society. Paradoxically, the decision was taken by Aslan Maskhadov, who was elected President of Chechnya in 1996 and had always opposed the Salafites. The sole purpose of his doing so was to wrest the initiative from his Salafite opponents.

The president and his associates, some of the field commanders and the Muslim clergy, including Kadyrov, opposed the Salafites in general. It is known that, in an attempt to postpone the introduction of shariah in Chechnya, Maskhadov and Kadyrov tried to enlist the support of some Arab and Malaysian leaders and theologians.<sup>19</sup> They and their numerous supporters realized that the introduction of shariah and the ensuing proclamation of an Islamic state would inevitably undermine their positions. In fact, the office of the first president to be elected in accordance with a secular constitution would be rendered illegitimate. A statement made by Abdul-Malik Medzhidov, commander of the Shariah Guard (whose appointment Maskhadov was compelled to approve) is typical: ‘I do not consider Maskhadov a legitimate head of the Islamic state . . . because in a Muslim state legitimacy can only be achieved under the shariah law, and it was not under this law that Maskhadov came to power’.<sup>20</sup>

The most important thing, however, is that far from all Chechens supported the introduction of shariah, let alone the establishment of an Islamic state. Shariah infringed on the mountain people’s traditions, in which personal freedom plays an important role. It was unacceptable to many women, who worked as hard as men and took an active part in social life. It ran counter to the norms of behaviour which people had formed in Soviet times and the notions they had acquired in Soviet secondary and higher schools. Finally, many Chechens regarded shariah as an alien influence exerted by Arabs and foreign Muslims in general who were trying to force their philosophy and way of life on Chechens. A statement by Zia Susuev, a member of the Presidium of the Executive of the United Congress of the Chechen People, expresses a view which is characteristic of part of Chechen society: ‘We Chechens, the descendants of ancient Hurrite tribes and bearers of the Caucasian mountain people’s traditions, confront the threat of being turned into a section of a faceless umma with the character and appearance of a Semitic tribe’.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> *Kavkazskaya Konfederatsiya* [The Caucasian Confederation] (Grozny), no. 2(11) (1999), p. 2.

<sup>20</sup> *Golos Chechenskoy Respubliki* [Voice of the Chechen Republic] (Grozny), 25 Feb. 1999, p. 3.

<sup>21</sup> Susuev, Z., ‘My narod bez prava vybora?’ [Are we a people without the right of choice?], *Golos Chechenskoy Respubliki*, 25 Feb. 1999, p. 1.

It is difficult today to assess which sections of the Chechen population (including the Chechen diaspora) supported the Islamization of their country and which opposed it. However, it is clear that the supporters of Islamization were far more active than the opponents and even tried to use force in achieving their ends. Furthermore, the Salafites interfered in the everyday life of the Chechens: they forbade the sale and consumption of alcohol, compelled women to wear clothes that were more in keeping with Islamic ethics, and so on. They interfered in people's religious life, forbidding the observance of *tarikats* customs such as visiting the graves of holy sheikhs. (The height of the anti-*tarikats* campaign was an attempt by the Salafites in 1995 to destroy the grave of Kunta-Hadji's mother, Hedi. This led to a clash between the Salafites and the followers of Kunta-Hadji.)

It was in the struggle for power that the opposition between the Salafites and the supporters of Maskhadov and Kadyrov was the strongest. The question of introducing shariah and proclaiming Chechnya an Islamic state was above all a political one. In August 1997 opposition took the form of armed clashes in Gudermes between 'Wahhabite' detachments and the National Guard, which supported Maskhadov. The coup attempt was unsuccessful. Following it, the Shariah Guard was disbanded and several Salafite leaders and preachers, including Bagautdin Muhammad, were banished.

However, the success of Maskhadov and his allies was only partial: the Islamic radicals continued to enjoy the support of such politicians as Basayev and Yandarbiyev who did not want the 'Wahhabites' to be defeated either as a political force or as a religious trend. A stalemate had developed in the republic: while Maskhadov tried to regain the political initiative from the Islamic radicals, Mufti Kadyrov continued to criticize the Salafites/Wahhabites, stressing the incompatibility of their views not only with Caucasian Islamic tradition but also with Islam in general. Meanwhile, the Salafites continued to insist on the introduction of an Islamic mode of government.

Basayev's well-known raid into Dagestan in 1999 triggered off the second Chechen campaign, in the course of which his supporters suffered heavy losses and a pro-Moscow civil administration began to be formed on the part of the territory controlled by the federal forces. (Kadyrov, who resigned as Mufti of Chechnya in 2000, was appointed head of this administration.) Following the raid the idea of setting up an Islamic state was once again transformed into calls for a holy war.

#### IV. The failure of the 'Salafite project'

The idea of establishing an Islamic state in Chechnya (unlike the launching of *jihad*) seems to have been stillborn. It did not have the necessary social and religious basis; its advocates lacked the appropriate professional—theological, legal and administrative—training, and many 'Wahhabite' leaders had compromised themselves in the eyes of the Muslims by their misdeeds, acts of

cruelty and an unquenchable thirst for power. While advocating ‘pure Islam’, they pursued ‘only one purpose—to be the “fathers of the nation” and to get high posts—not for the sake of the Islamic idea but for the sake of acquiring creature comforts and earthly grandeur’.<sup>22</sup> That is how the ‘Wahhabites’ were characterized by their opponents among the participants in jihad.

One of the reasons, albeit not the main reason, for the failure of the idea was Moscow’s total rejection of any form of Islamic statehood in Chechnya. Russian propaganda, both official and unofficial, did all it could to discredit shariah and its supporters and used the struggle against radical Islam as one of its main arguments for justifying before the rest of the world Moscow’s policy in Chechnya and the North Caucasus as a whole. Indeed, the proclamation of shariah as the only law in Chechnya did nothing to help evoke Western sympathy for the Chechen resistance, which Maskhadov and some other Chechen leaders were constantly seeking.

The Chechen experiment of introducing shariah as a first stage in the formation of an Islamic statehood on the territory of the former USSR is far from unique. Efforts in this direction have already been made in Central Asia and in Dagestan. The ‘Salafite project’ is gradually becoming a pervasive—actual or latent—form of socio-political activity in the Muslim territories of the CIS.

It is an established view that the idea of Islamic government is a utopia supported almost exclusively by religious fanatics and political adventurers. The introduction of shariah does not have the approval of all Muslims. Shariah enclaves exist today and will appear in the future. A case in point is the ‘Kadar zone’—the villages of Karamakhi, Chabanmakhi and Kadar—in Dagestan, Tavildara in Tajikistan, and some regions in Uzbekistan and even in Kyrgyzstan, which in the autumn of 2000 found themselves under the control of the Islamists. In some cases an Islamic ‘proto-state’ has been known to exist for several months and even years. However, there is not a single Chechen village, let alone town or city, under shariah control. This is highly indicative: despite jihad, no stable Salafite enclaves where the bulk of the population favours the introduction of shariah have been formed in Chechnya. On the popular level, as it were, Salafism has proved incapable of providing the basis for the development of an eventual state. Moreover, the Salafites, having failed to secure their rear in the form of territories that they trusted, were compelled to shift their struggle abruptly to the national level where they no longer appeared as fighters for social justice and ‘true Islam’ but rather as ordinary political self-seekers, and at that level their struggle for an Islamic state was deprived of its would-be religious sanction.

In Chechnya the national Salafite project was doomed because it lacked a firm socio-cultural basis: it only existed on a verbal level. Besides, its implementation resulted in continuous confrontation between different military-political groupings. The Salafites turned out to be only one of the political

<sup>22</sup> ‘Obrashcheniye k parlamentu Chechenskoy Respubliki Ichkeriya Soyuzu veteranov Yugo-Zapadnogo napravleniya’ [Address to the Parliament of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria by the Veterans’ Union of the South-Western Sector], *Jihad*, no. 3 (Jan. 1999), p. 1.

forces. Furthermore, they failed to impress the Muslims as fighters for the faith and for justice.<sup>23</sup>

Failure in Chechnya impelled the Chechen Salafites to try to construct the project elsewhere in the North Caucasus, above all in Dagestan, where Salafiya was particularly deep-rooted. It was there that they won their greatest social influence, organized appropriate groups and movements, and even introduced quasi-shariah government in territories under their control.<sup>24</sup> They were not, however, able to expand their influence any further. They were opposed by the entire administration of the republic and by the local clergy, who began to cooperate closely with the tarikat sheikhs, forming a united religious–political bloc against the Salafites. Thus in Dagestan the Salafites did not have reliable patronage or protection on the republican level. Meanwhile their opposite numbers in Chechnya held strong positions in the leadership of the republic but had no reliable social base and no serious religious prestige in the eyes of their fellow citizens.

Cooperation between the Salafites in Dagestan and the Salafitic Chechen politicians started in the mid-1990s, and on that basis there appeared what seemed a potentially powerful religious–political coalition whose purpose was to set up a common Islamic state on the territory of Chechnya and Dagestan. It was expected that this state would be joined by some other North Caucasian republics, primarily Ingushetia, Chechnya's neighbour, worn out by its long-lasting conflict with North Ossetia, a republic with a predominantly Christian population. The aims of the Chechen radicals were to spread their influence to new territories under the cover of Islamic phraseology. (Later, in 1999, these aims were modified, and Basayev's raid into Dagestan was meant as a kind of compensation for his rather ineffectual actions inside Chechnya, including the period when he was vice-premier under President Maskhadov.<sup>25</sup>)

On the practical level these aims were promoted by various joint Dagestani–Chechen organizations, the largest being the Congress of the Peoples of Chechnya and Dagestan, formed in April 1998. Its stated strategic aim was the 'unification of the Caucasian peoples on the basis of the laws of Allah'.<sup>26</sup> The initiative of setting up the Congress belonged to such organizations, formerly influential on the Chechen political scene, as the Islamic Nation and the Socio-Political Union of the Caucasian Confederation. It is noteworthy that Dagestan

<sup>23</sup> There is abundant evidence that, while demanding that others observe the shariah norms, members of the Shariah Guard themselves consumed alcohol, used drugs and committed other acts incompatible with shariah.

<sup>24</sup> For more detail see Shikhsaidov, A., 'Islam v Dagestane, Tsentral'noy Azii i na Kavkaze' [Islam in Dagestan, Central Asia and the Caucasus], *Central Asia and the Caucasus* (Luleå), no. 5 (1999); Makarov, D., 'Ofitsial'ny i neofitsial'ny Islam v Dagestane' [Official and unofficial Islam in Dagestan] (manuscript), 1999; and Maksakov, I., 'Sootnosheniye islamskikh dvizhenii Dagestana' [The correlation of the Islamic movements in Dagestan], *NG-Religii* (supplement to *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*), 18 Mar. 1998.

<sup>25</sup> Many experts believe that Basayev's raid was a provocation engineered by the Russian special services in order to justify the resumption of military operations in Chechnya and defeat the local militants. This view is ignored here.

<sup>26</sup> Dzadzhev, A., *Kongress Narodov Chechni i Dagestana: Set' Etnologicheskogo Monitoringa i Rannego Preduprezhdeniya Konfliktov* [Congress of the Peoples of Chechnya and Dagestan: a network of ethnological monitoring and early prevention of conflicts] (Moscow, June 1998), p. 19.

was represented only by the Supreme Council of the Lak People (a local ethnic group).

As the Congress was being created, it became clear that the idea of unifying Chechnya and Dagestan on an Islamic basis was not very popular in Dagestan because to its ruling republican elite and the local ethnic groups this would mean a redistribution of power and wealth in favour of the Chechens and their placemen—something no one in Dagestan could agree to. Furthermore, in Dagestan itself the Salafites, while active, are in a minority. Thus the idea of unification on an Islamic basis does not meet with understanding from the majority of Dagestanis.

Besides, the creation of an Islamic political alliance like that would never be allowed by Russia, which is very sensitive to the 'Islamic threat' and is waging a consistent, although poorly organized, struggle against it. The consolidation of such a union would lead to the expansion of the zone of separatism and to general destabilization in the North Caucasus, as well as in the entire southern macro-region of the Russian Federation comprising the Stavropol and Krasnodar territories, the Rostov and Astrakhan regions and the Republic of Kalmykia. The appearance of a Dagestani–Chechen state would mean the emergence of the Islamic radicals onto the Caspian seaboard, which would affect the correlation of forces in that oil-producing region. This would upset, with unpredictable consequences, the already unstable balance of interests and forces there.

The Chechen politicians who talk about the prospects of establishing an Islamic state in the North Caucasus must be aware of all these circumstances which make it impossible to realize their project. Shamil Basayev, head of the Congress of the Peoples of Chechnya and Dagestan, became convinced of that after his detachments were routed and driven out of Dagestan.

(In spite of this, a community of interests between the Dagestanis and the Chechens has been demonstrated on the path of Islam: the Chechen and Dagestani Salafites fought shoulder to shoulder both in Chechnya and in Dagestan against the Russian federal troops and Interior Ministry detachments which, it should be noted, included Dagestani natives. Some believe that the majority of Basayev's fighters who invaded Dagestan in 1999 were Dagestanis. Hundreds of them today are members of the fighting Chechen detachments and they are said to be the most ardent advocates of jihad.)

The failure of the Islam-based Chechen–Dagestani unity project, coupled with the relative successes of the federal forces in Chechnya in 1999–2000, put an end to the Chechen radicals' hopes of creating a union of the peoples of the North Caucasus (with implied Chechen leadership). Evidently, belief in the success of the project existed only in the minds of Muslim fanatics who had lost touch with reality and political demagogues such as Movladi Udugov, former Chechen Foreign Minister and Vice-Premier.<sup>27</sup>

Russian politicians, most of whom reacted with pain to the radical Islamic slogans, found the propaganda of the idea of an Islamic state to their advantage:

<sup>27</sup> It is doubtful that, while stressing his loyalty to the idea of establishing an Islamic state in the North Caucasus, Udugov seriously believed it to be feasible, for he has always been a pragmatist.

to the nationalists it furnished a convenient pretext for demonstrating their xenophobia and 'Islamophobia', while the democrats criticized the very combination of religion and politics as medieval. The Russian leadership identified ethnic separatism more and more with Wahhabite ideology.

The Russian military are interested in keeping up the 'Islamic threat' propaganda since it enables them to maintain their importance in the public eye as the chief barrier in the way of religious extremism and terrorism. This goes for both local Chechen and general international Islamic extremism. Russia's military and political elites see eye to eye on this matter. Russia regards the struggle against international Islamic extremism as confirmation that it and the world democratic community have common positions and that Russia takes an active part in world affairs. (This attitude is confirmed by its activity in Central Asia in the spring and summer of 2000, where it sided more or less successfully with the local ruling regimes against the militants of Uzbekistan's Islamic movement.)

## V. External influences

In this connection how strong is the influence of external forces on events in Chechnya and on the efforts of the local Salafites to create an Islamic state?

In the 1990s Russian politicians and the mass media gave a good deal of attention to this question. Their main effort was aimed at proving that there was continuous coordination of actions between different Islamic forces, including radical religious-political organizations and even some state structures. Moreover, it was asserted that some Western intelligence services were implicated in the activity of the Islamic radicals: 'certain Western and Islamic special services plan to spread instability and Wahhabism in Central Asia and the North Caucasus'.<sup>28</sup> This view would have been completely justified at the time of the Soviet military presence in Afghanistan. Its application to the present-day situation, however, indicates partiality and impedes a true understanding of the motivation of the Islamic movement and the course its development is likely to take, including in the North Caucasus. It is rooted in a conspiracy theory and its exponents often ignore the internal reasons for the appearance of radical Islam in a particular region, including Chechnya. While there is no denying that Islamic radicals have offered cooperation or that the Chechen Wahhabites have received outside financial assistance, it must be admitted that they act in accordance with an inner logic of their own. It is well known that the Chechens are dissatisfied with the extent of Islamic solidarity shown in their conflict with Moscow, especially in the late 1990s, and that they have expressed disappointment at the fact that not a single Muslim state has yet recognized Chechnya as an independent entity.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Surikov, A. and Baranov, A., 'Wahhabity kak kontseptual'naya ugroza' [Wahhabites as a conceptual threat], *Pravda*, 5 Feb. 1998.

<sup>29</sup> The Chechen Republic was recognized by Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Turkish part of Cyprus and the Taliban movement in Afghanistan.

A Russian researcher, Alexander Ignatenko, has expressed an opinion that is very difficult to agree with but also not easy to argue against. 'It is possible', he has said, 'to trace a process, directed from the outside, whereby the Chechen autonomist movement is being Islamized and its detachments are being turned into units of the worldwide Islamist (Wahhabite) movement'.<sup>30</sup> It is, however, not quite correct to consider the events in Chechnya and the related attempts to create an Islamic state in the North Caucasus as part of some kind of geopolitical project conceived at the headquarters of Islamic organizations and deliberately supported by united Islamic capital, particularly in view of the fact that after the Chechens suffered their first major setbacks external sources of support began to dry up. (This was the reason for a statement made by Khattab at the end of 1999 to the effect that the mission assigned to him by Allah had been completed and that he was leaving Chechnya.)

It should be remembered that to many Muslim countries the problem of separatism is also sensitive. North Caucasian separatism, even under the banner of Islam, could touch off a chain reaction in the neighbouring regions—in Turkey and Iraq, for instance, where there are Kurdish populations struggling for independence. The appearance of a new Islamic state in the south of Russia would be of questionable benefit to the Muslim world and would pose new, very complex problems to the Muslim community. For instance, this community would have to take partial responsibility for such actions carried out by Chechen Muslims as the taking of hostages, terrorist attacks and much else.<sup>31</sup>

A distinction should be made between the anti-Russian rhetoric that has become widespread in many Muslim countries and the concrete actions of their governments. It is noteworthy that throughout the Chechen conflict there has been no sudden deterioration of Russia's relations with any of the Muslim states. Moreover, criticism of Russian policy in the North Caucasus expressed by the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), the most influential organization in the Muslim world, has been much more restrained than that which came from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

All this point to the conclusion that on the national (Chechen) and the regional (North Caucasian) levels the 'Salafite (Islamic) project' has not had any significant outside support. The external factor has not, nor could it have, played a decisive role in the Chechen jihad, nor has it succeeded in establishing an Islamic state. This is the principal difference between the situation in the North Caucasus and that in Central Asia where a similar project, despite strong opposition, has a chance of being realized on a national level, and will inevitably affect the general situation in the Caspian region.

<sup>30</sup> Ignatenko, A., 'Ot Filippin do Kosovo: Islamizm kak global'ny destabiliziruyushchiy faktor' [From the Philippines to Kosovo: Islamism as a global destabilizing factor], *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 12 Oct. 2000, p. 8.

<sup>31</sup> Such actions were often sanctioned by clergymen who came to Chechnya from the Middle East and who cooperated with the radicals. However, it should be taken into account that, according to the Islamic canons, practically any Muslim who is at the moment recognized as a religious authority by other Muslims can utter fatwa (judgement in the name of Islam). In Chechnya, any man who knew Arabic and could interpret the Koran, especially if he had distinguished himself in military operations, was regarded as such an authority.

The fact that it was impossible to realize the ‘Salafite project’ in Chechnya, even on the scale of village or district and its failure on the national and North Caucasian level (with Chechnya as the nucleus) show that Chechnya cannot and will not become the main centre for the spread of the Salafite ideology and related political practice.

The popularity of the idea of jihad in the first half of the 1990s is explained above all by the fact that it was an ideology of national resistance, a factor for unification on an ethnic basis, not a religious one. When it came to introducing Islamic norms into the legislative process, let alone into the process of state development, Chechen society split, the bulk of it rejecting the idea of state development on a religious basis.

Even the affluent, radically thinking believers abroad proved to be powerless to do anything about it. The threat of ‘Wahhabism winning victory in the North Caucasus’<sup>32</sup> which is used to scare the Russian ‘man in the street’ is ephemeral.

However, the limited extent of the re-Islamization of Chechen society and the failure to Islamize its administrative structures do not mean that Islam has withdrawn from the socio-political life of Chechnya or the North Caucasus as a whole. Its influence on the society will continue, although it will have its ups and downs. It may grow whenever the forces in power—in Chechnya and the North Caucasus in general—are unable to resolve complex economic and social problems. In such cases the attractiveness of the ‘Islamic alternative’ will grow again, and the experience of the Islamic radical forces will again be in demand.

<sup>32</sup> Gapbaev, A., ‘Wahhabizm na Kavkaze’ [Wahhabism in the Caucasus], *Den’ Respubliki* (Cherkessk), 19 Aug. 2000, p. 2.