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The Afghanisation of Chechnya

Peter Brownfeld*

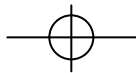
Chechnya is in desperate need of a political solution as attempts at a military one over the last nine years have failed, radicalising the Chechens and allowing the influence of Islamic fundamentalism to enter the Caucasus. What had been a secular and democratic independence movement may now be changing as radical Islam and terrorism are beginning to be embraced by an increasingly desperate populace, posing risks not only for Russia, but also for Europe and the United States.

A history of conflict

Chechnya has been intermittently at war with Russia for centuries. As the Russian empire was expanding in the eighteenth century, Chechens resisted for years before finally being absorbed. In the 1830s, they renewed their efforts for independence, a struggle that lasted until 1859 and even afterwards continued sporadically. Under communism, life for the Chechens did not become easier. In 1944, Josef Stalin deported the Chechens, numbering about half a million, to central Asia. Thousands died either resisting or during the journey. In 1957, Nikita Khrushchev allowed them to return to their homeland.¹

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¹ For the history of Chechnya, see J. B. Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya: Roots of a Separatist Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). For an overview of Chechnya's more recent history, see A. Politkovskaya, *A Dirty War* (London: Harvill Press, 2001).



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As the Soviet Union was collapsing in 1991, Chechnya, like other Soviet republics, declared independence. Russia refused to accept the secession. In October 1991, Dzhokar Dudayev, a former Soviet air force general and leader of the secessionists, was elected president of the republic, but the elections were not recognised by Russia. Pro-Russian elements in Chechnya also refused allegiance to Dudayev and intra-Chechen upheaval ensued. In 1994, President Boris Yeltsin sent troops into Chechnya.

After Dudayev was killed in a rocket attack in April 1996, mounting Russian and international public opinion led Moscow to agree to enter into peace talks. These culminated in August 1996 in the Khasavyurt ceasefire agreement which provided for the withdrawal of Russian forces, a referendum on independence in December 2001 and presidential elections. In the latter, held in January 1997, moderate Aslan Mashkadov was elected President of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria. In May 1997, he signed a peace treaty with Russia providing Chechnya with *de facto* independence but putting the issue of status on hold until the December 2001 referendum.

Between 1996 and 1999 conditions in Chechnya deteriorated. Chechnya had been badly damaged by the war, the economy was in a shambles and not enough aid was coming in to finance reconstruction. At the same time, the elected government was unable to exercise control over radical Islamist, terrorist and other movements that had gained a foothold during the war. Russian and Chechen sources estimate that 157 armed groups were acting independently of the Chechen government at that time.²

In August 1999, one of the fundamentalist warlords, Ibn Khattab, helped lead a raid of Chechen rebels into the Russian province of Dagestan, triggering a Russian military crackdown. Chechnya had become a security issue for Russia. But it was the September 1999 bombing of an apartment building in Moscow in which 300 people were killed, allegedly perpetrated by Chechen terrorists,³ that prompted a new Russian military intervention.

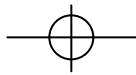
Chechnya is now a nation of warlords and anarchy. In the last nine years, 180,000⁴ Chechens have been killed and 350,000⁵ displaced, out of a population of just 1.1 million. That means 16 percent of the population has

² "The nature and evolution of the modern Chechen crisis" <www.chechnyafree.ru.index.php?lng=eng§ion=historyeng&row=3>

³ G. Feifer, "Three Years Later, Moscow Apartment Bombings Remain Unsolved", Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), September 2002.

⁴ Y. Baulin, "The War in Chechnya: Uncontrollable Waste of Huge Sums", *Novaya Gazetta*, no. 85, November 2002, pp. 2-3.

⁵ "UNHCR Paper on Asylum Seekers from the Russian Federation in the Context of the Situation in Chechnya" (Geneva: United Nations High Commission for Refugees, January 2002) p. 3.



been killed during the wars. Compare that to Kosovo, where 0.6 percent of Kosovars were killed, and one gets a sense of the nightmarish magnitude of the conflict.⁶

The human rights disaster is of historic proportions. According to the International Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, "The numbers of disappeared Chechens in recent months indicate a continuing assault against the Chechen people that borders on genocide".⁷ Russia has deployed approximately 80,000 troops to this region half the size of Belgium. American-based Human Rights Watch has reported that the Russian military's activities include "committing hundreds of forced disappearances, extrajudicial executions, and widespread acts of torture and ill-treatment".⁸ One more frightening statistic: Russian authorities have designated approximately 73 percent of Chechen territory environmentally contaminated.⁹ Most of the damage has been done by oil spills due to the increasingly primitive methods of production. Additional contaminants include nuclear waste and other radioactive material as well as sewage from destroyed systems.

The terror swamp

International terrorists have only recently become interested and involved in Chechnya. With the conflict seeming endless and Russian treatment insufferable, Islamic terrorists and fundamentalism are gaining a foothold in Chechnya. In December 1996, al Qaeda's second in command and America's most wanted terror suspect after Osama bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri, investigated transferring the terror network's headquarters to Chechnya.¹⁰ In the fall of 1999, three of the eventual 11 September hijackers were sent by al Qaeda to the United States after their first goal – fighting in Chechnya –

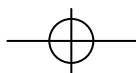
⁶ C. Swift "The War in Chechnya: Moral and Strategic Dimensions", The American Committee for Peace in Chechnya, Washington DC, p. 6.

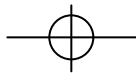
⁷ "Adequate Security Conditions do not Exist in Chechnya to Allow the Return of Displaced Citizens," International Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, 23 July 2002.

⁸ "Human Rights Watch briefing paper to the 59th Session of the UN Commission on Human Rights", Human Rights Watch, 7 April 2003, p. 2; see also: "Russian Federation-Chechnya; Only an international investigation will end impunity; The UN Commission on Human Rights must act now," Amnesty International, AI Index EUR 46/007/2001, 29 March 2001 <<http://web.amnesty.org/library/IndexPrint/ENGEUR460072001?open>>.

⁹ Swift, "The War in Chechnya", p. 7.

¹⁰ M. Franchetti, "Bin Laden's Top Lieutenant Sought Bases in Chechnya", Sunday Times, 27 October 2002.





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was determined to be unnecessary.¹¹ Mounir El Motassadeq, the first man to face trial for the 11 September attacks, told a Hamburg court that Mohammed Atta, believed to have piloted the first plane into the World Trade Center, declared that he and others wanted to go to Chechnya to fight.¹² In November 2002, Osama bin Laden himself invoked Chechnya in a message broadcast on al Jazeera: "As you look at your dead in Moscow, also recall ours in Chechnya", he told the Russian people.¹³

Already, some Chechens have turned to terror tactics, including the attack on a Moscow theatre in fall 2002 and the more recent attacks in summer 2003. Over the last twelve months, suicide bombers have killed at least 175 people. Garnering the attention of the Western press, the suicide bombings are a confirmation of Chechnya's volatility – and the dangers of allowing the radical Islamist movement beginning to take root there to thrive.¹⁴

The greatest concern for the West is the possibility that Chechnya could serve as a base and recruiting ground for al Qaeda or other terror networks. Chechnya has a tradition of moderate Sufi Islam, and the conflict has thus far been a secular one. However, Islamic militants have gone to Chechnya to join in the struggle, bringing with them their brand of radical Wahhabi Islam.¹⁵ Radical Islamist networks have reportedly sent over \$100 million in aid to the rebels since 1996.¹⁶ Khattab, who fought against the Russians alongside bin Laden in Afghanistan and is reputed to have had al Qaeda ties, led one of Chechnya's best-trained units from 1995 until his death in 2002.

¹¹ A. Notz and H. Williamson, "Court Hears 9/11 Pilots Had Links with Chechens", *Financial Times*, 30 October 2002, p. 7.

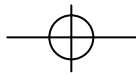
¹² A. Geisler, "Sept. 11 Suspect Tells Court Hijackers Wanted to Fight in Chechnya," *Agence France Presse*, 29 October 2002.

¹³ "Text of Reputed Bin Laden Audiotape Broadcast by Al Jazeera," *Agence France Presse*, 13 November 2002.

¹⁴ In a 16 May statement on the recent suicide attack, the Foreign Ministry of the self-proclaimed Chechen Republic of Ichkeria drew a grave picture of the potential for growth in terrorism. "Years of indiscriminate warfare, characterised by Russia's policy of collective terrorisation and humiliation towards the Chechen people, has created a climate of impunity and an atmosphere of hopelessness and desperation. Sadly, Russia's genocidal policies have led marginal elements in our society to embrace terror and death." "This Wave of Suicide Attacks Leaves No Room for Illusion: Chechnya Needs Peace and Needs it Now" <http://www.chechnya-mfa.info/print_news.php?func=detail&par=81>.

¹⁵ M. Wines, "War on Terror Casts Chechen Conflict in a New Light," *New York Times*, 9 December 2001, p. 1A.

¹⁶ "Russian Money for Chechnya Stolen as Cash for Rebels Floods In", *BBC Worldwide Monitoring*, 9 February 2003; A. Cohen, "Moscow Hostage Crisis Demands Greater US-Russia Security Cooperation", *Heritage Foundation Executive Memorandum*, 11 December 2002.



With leaders such as Khattab came the green Muslim flag and strict Sharia law, previously uncommon in Chechnya.¹⁷ The impact of these newcomers has in many places transformed Chechen life. Some men are starting to grow long beards, women to wear the Arab-style hijab, a head-to-toe black dress that leaves only the eyes uncovered.¹⁸

In an interview last December with (American) National Public Radio, one Chechen rebel named Rustom described the Arabs' influence, "Before, I didn't have any special desire to die for Allah. I didn't even realise what Islam really was. Arab[s] started showing up in our camp. We went through an Islamic battle training course. They prepared us spiritually as much as possible."¹⁹

The new Afghanistan?

The proximity of the Caucasus to Afghanistan and the anarchy in Chechnya makes it likely that displaced terror training camps and cells already have relocated or will relocate to Chechnya. Jean-Louis Bruguiere, France's top investigative judge for terrorism cases, stated, "The Caucasus, and in particular Chechnya, is becoming a base for international terrorism."²⁰ He warned that "Chechnya holds the same position in the Islamic world as Afghanistan [did] four years ago."²¹ Underlining that this transfer may have already taken place, Rohan Gunaratna, a terrorism expert and the author of *Inside Al Qaeda*, said "Chechnya and the Pankisi Gorge in Georgia partially replaced Afghanistan as a centre for terrorist training. The initial wave of terrorists who are now coming to Europe trained in Chechnya or Algeria."²² Similarly, Magnus Ranstorp, director of the Center for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence at the University of St. Andrews, Scotland, noted, "There is a prevailing view in the security community that the center of gravity, the new Afghanistan of terrorists, is Chechnya, and not just Chechnya itself, but the surrounding republics."²³ Moscow interprets these

¹⁷ S. LaFraniere, "How Jihad Made Its Way to Chechnya", *The Washington Post*, 26 April 2003, pp. A1, A22.

¹⁸ L. Aron, "Chechnya: The New Dimensions of an Old Crisis", *Russian Outlook*, American Enterprise Institute, February 2003.

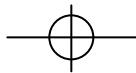
¹⁹ Transcript of *Weekend Edition*, National Public Radio, 15 December 2002.

²⁰ E. Guseinov, "We Should View the Chechnya Problem Differently," *Izvestia*, 21 June 2003, pp. 1, 4.

²¹ M. Katkov, "Al Qaeda: Still Active, Still Dangerous", CBS Broadcasting, 14 January 2003.

²² LaFraniere, "How Jihad Made Its Way to Chechnya".

²³ M. Wines, "Russia Sees More Chechens Turn to Terror," *International Herald Tribune*, 10 July 2003, p. 4.



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developments not as an indication that its war is backfiring, but as further justification for the campaign in Chechnya, producing a spiral of violence.

With Washington focused on the fight against terrorism, Moscow has gone to great lengths to demonstrate that its war in Chechnya is part of this battle. The Kremlin has constantly described all Chechen guerrillas as "terrorists" and has frequently compared Russia's struggle with America's anti-terror efforts. On 28 April 2003, Sergei Ignatchenko, spokesman for the FSB security service, told the Russian news agency ITAR-TASS, "The Chechen terrorists, al Qaeda, Muslim Brotherhood, and a number of other extremist Islamic groups, which are directly connected with each other, form a single system of international terrorism, which was involved in the organisation of all major acts of terrorism throughout the world over the past five to six years."²⁴

With this public relations strategy, Moscow's contribution to the war on terrorism (use of Russian bases in Central Asia, public support for America's war on al Qaeda, etc.), and America's naturally increased sensitivity to terrorism, Washington seems to be willing to see Chechnya the way the Kremlin depicts it. Two weeks after 11 September, US President George W. Bush remarked, "Our initial phase of the war on terrorism is against the al Qaeda organization, and we do believe there are some al Qaeda folks in Chechnya."²⁵ White House Press Secretary Ari Fleischer reinforced Bush's comments: "There is no question that there is an international terrorist presence in Chechnya that has links to Osama bin Laden." He demanded that Chechen leaders "immediately" sever ties with terrorists.²⁶

Failed attempts at resolution

Putin's rise to power was in part based on a pledge to resolve the Chechen conflict. With Russian forces sustaining five to ten fatalities a week and draining an already strained budget, putting an end to the unpopular war has become a new priority for Putin, who faces re-election in December 2003. Unfortunately, Russia's attempts at a political process, including a referendum, an amnesty and elections, have been marred by its refusal to give these processes real weight.

In March 2003, the referendum on whether or not to make Chechnya an inseparable part of Russia was finally held. According to Russian authorities, there was an enormous turnout and voters overwhelmingly voted in favour. Non-governmental organisations and Western press reports, however,

²⁴ "Chechen Terrorists Linked to Al-Qa'idah", ITAR-TASS, 28 April 2003.

²⁵ "US Defends New Line on Chechnya", Deutsche Presse Agentur, 26 September 2001.

²⁶ B. Sammon, "Chechnya Linked to Terrorists", Washington Times, 27 September 2001, p. A4.

widely denounced the referendum as fatally flawed.²⁷

Shortly after the referendum, Putin offered an amnesty to combatants in the Chechen war. Despite the appearance of moving forward towards peace, the details of the amnesty give little reason for optimism. The amnesty applies to crimes such as genocide, mercenary soldiery and torture – crimes mostly perpetrated by Russian forces. Crimes such as attempted assassination of individuals administering justice, law enforcement officers, servicemen or members of their families – those mostly committed by Chechen rebels – are not covered.²⁸

Moscow's next step has been to call an October 2003 election in which Maskhadov – considered a "non-amnestiable" terrorist and criminal²⁹ – is barred from running and Akhmed Kadyrov, head of the current temporary administration set up by Moscow in June 2000, is almost assured victory. Commenting on these measures, *The Economist* stated, "Its [the amnesty's] terms would exclude many rebels and seem more designed to pardon Russian troops, while the election will most likely be a way to legitimise a pro-Moscow puppet."³⁰ Summarising the same measures, Boris Nemtsov, the leader of the Union of Right Forces faction in the Duma, noted "Chechen terrorism can be halted only if President Putin acknowledges the underlying causes: that the second war in Chechnya is continuing; that the real process of normalization has not begun, and that the inaction of authorities and the attempt to substitute a pseudo-process for a real process only generates terrorism."³¹

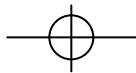
²⁷ The vote was not endorsed by international organisations, denied "observer" status, and journalists, whose movements were monitored very closely by Russian authorities, reported low turnouts: N. Nougayrede, "Russia Claims Success in Chechen Vote", *Guardian Weekly*, 9 April 2003; "Putin's Proposition: A Referendum in Chechnya", *The Economist*, 25 March 2003; A. Louis, "Kremlin Claims Victory in Chechen Poll", *United Press International*, 24 March 2003.

²⁸ A. Politkovskaya, "PR Amnesty for the Military," *Novaya Gazeta*, 2 June 2003; J. Bransten, "Russia: Critics Say Offer of Chechen Amnesty is Meaningless", *RFE/RL*, 22 May 2003 <http://www.rferl.org/nca/features/2003/05/2205200_3153000.asp>; N. Abdullaev, "Duma Approves Chechen Amnesty", *The Moscow Times*, 22 May 2003 <<http://www.themoscowtimes.com/stories/2003/05/22/002.html>>.

²⁹ Sergei Yastrzhembsky, Kremlin spokesman on Chechnya, told the Interfax news agency: "Maskhadov cannot apply for the amnesty, since several articles of the penal code under which he is accused do not fall under the amnesty that was declared in the republic. ... He therefore cannot participate in the elections." (M. Elder, "Kremlin Slaps Down Idea of Chechen Rebel Leader Running for President," *Agence France Presse*, 14 July 2003)

³⁰ "The Black Widows' Revenge", *The Economist*, 12 July 2003, p. 44.

³¹ B. Nemtsov, "Stopping Terror Requires Real Peace Talks," *International Herald Tribune*, 11 July 2003, p. 6.



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Political solution sought

In discussing international terrorism, the Russia-Chechnya conflict must be kept in context. The Chechens' war is one of secession, not of Islamic fundamentalism. Their goal is an independent state, not the destruction of the West. While Afghanistan was flooded with thousands of foreign Muslim fighters, the numbers in Chechnya are still in the hundreds. Alexander Iskanderyan, director of the independent Centre for Caucasian Studies in Moscow, described the war as an independence movement: "The penetration of outside money and [Islamic] ideology occurred later, and to some extent was an inevitable consequence of Chechnya's deterioration. But the Chechen rebellion remains, at its heart, a secessionist struggle. It therefore needs a political solution, not a military one."³²

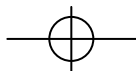
In addition, the Chechens are traditionally not very religious, with families and clans playing a more important role in their society than religion. Chechen resistance did not begin with the rise of radical Islam or international terrorism. Michael Gordon, who has covered the conflict for the *New York Times*, said "There's no question that there is an Islamic link to the conflict in Chechnya. ... However, if you were to take that way, if you subtracted the connections with Islamic militants and extremists, the conflict would be going on pretty much [the same way] and the Chechen people would be resisting Russian government of their republic."³³

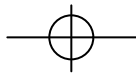
On 18 March 2003, Chechnya's political leaders put forward a formula for peace that would put Chechnya on the path to independence. Recognising the security threat Chechnya poses to Russia and the haven Chechnya could become for terrorists, the proposal is for a conditional independence with a period of several years of international administration that would include both UN peacekeeping troops and civilian administrators. Independence would be conditional on democratisation via an international administration, thus making it compatible with Russia's interests, as a violent, autocratic Chechen state would never be granted independence.

Chechnya would temporarily be placed under UN administration. With

³² F. Weir, "Chechen-Taliban Alliance," *Christian Science Monitor*, 27 February 2002, p. D01
Yevgeny Volk of the Heritage Foundation in Moscow explained that, "What Putin calls international terrorism is actually a very specific form of Chechen national terrorism. ... Any comparison with September 11 is artificial. Chechen resistance is quite different in demands, style, and performance."; see A. Jack, "West Is Worried at What it Sees in Moscow's Mirror", *Financial Times*, 13 November 2002, p. 22.

³³ "Deadlocked: Russia's Forgotten War", *CNN Presents*, Transcript # 062200CN.V79, 22 June 2002.





this status, Russia, as a member of the Security Council, would maintain a level of control over Chechen affairs, and the UN could delay Chechen independence as long as it posed a security risk to Russia. While Russia is strongly opposed to this proposal, and indeed any international involvement in Chechnya, there are many potential benefits for it. Among them are solving the centuries-long problem of what to do with this hostile sector of its population, and freeing Russia from the economic burden of the Chechen war and the international political embarrassment of the human rights problems. On the other hand, Russia has important oil and natural gas interests in the area with pipelines running to the Black and Caspian Seas that it is unwilling to give up. Furthermore, it is concerned that allowing the establishment of an independent state – and a Muslim one at that – could serve as a precedent for other republics in the area. Nevertheless, the proposal ought to receive a fair hearing from Moscow, Washington, the EU and the United Nations.

To begin resolving this conflict, Moscow must rein in its armed forces and allow foreign reporters and international observers to monitor the human rights situation. Most importantly, Russia needs to sit down with the elected Chechen leadership to negotiate a long-term peace settlement, the ingredients of which must include provisions for Russian security and a significant degree of Chechen autonomy, whether it be autonomy within Russia or full independence. At the same time, the Chechens will have to harness the renegade elements that have been acting independently. The Chechens are eager for outside intervention, and Putin is beginning to realise that the military's losses – not to speak of the terror sown by the suicide attacks – is politically unsustainable.

A US- or EU- or UN-brokered settlement could be acceptable to both sides. But for this to happen, the West must recognise that the terror threat that comes from Chechnya is not an indigenous part of the centuries-long Chechen struggle for independence, but rather a result of the radicalisation of the conflict. Chechnya should be a part of American and European anti-terror efforts. Western gratitude for Russian help in the war on terror should not trump the clear security interests in forestalling the rise of radical Islam in the Caucasus. Should the radicalisation and Islamisation of that conflict continue, Western security interests will be in danger. Chechnya will not be against the US and Europe in the war on terror if both help Russia accept that the Chechens have true and longstanding national grievances that need to be addressed.

