



The Chechen Imbroglia: An Update

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Summary

The August 30 suicide attack in Chechnya's capital Grozny was not a one off incident of terrorism; in fact terror attacks in Russia involving Chechens and other militant Islamist groups have increased in recent years following a brief interregnum during 2005-2007. These acts of terrorism have underscored the threat posed by Islamists, for whom Chechnya has become the rallying point to propagate the idea of a Caucasus Emirate and which has started to find resonance in other north Caucasian Muslim republics like Dagestan and Kabardino-Balkaria. Chechen separatism has been wreaking havoc on Russia and it is not going to be cowed down easily. Russia needs to look beyond military measures to address the Chechen issue.

The August 30 suicide attack in Chechnya's capital Grozny was not a one off incident of terrorism; in fact terror attacks in Russia involving Chechens and other militant Islamist groups have increased in recent years following a brief interregnum during 2005-2007 (see table 1). The recent acts of terrorism in Chechnya and elsewhere in Russia involving the Chechens are indicative of the revival of terrorism as an instrument for promoting the cause of Chechen separatism. Moreover, these acts of terrorism have underscored the threat posed by Islamists, for whom Chechnya has become the rallying point to propagate the idea of a Caucasus Emirate and which has started to find resonance in other north Caucasian Muslim republics like Dagestan and Kabardino-Balkaria.

Table 1: Major Terror Attacks in Russia since 2008

	Date	Place	Fatalities	Injured victims
1	Nov. 6, 2008	Vladikavkaz	12	–
2	Aug. 17, 2009	Nazran	25	160
3	November 27, 2009	*	28	100
4	March 29, 2010	Moscow	40	100
5	October 19, 2010	Chechnya	6	17
6	January 24, 2011	Moscow	31	140
7	August 30, 2011	Grozny	8	16

* High-speed train between Moscow and St. Petersburg.

Source: Fox News.com

In October 2007, the separatist Chechen leader Doku Umarov issued a statement proclaiming himself the emir of 'the Caucasus Emirate', which sought to establish an Islamic state across the north Caucasus. In January 2010, he stated that Islamist separatist forces under his control would stage attacks in Russian cities. He subsequently declared that he had personally ordered two suicide attacks on the Moscow Metro in March 2010. Earlier, in November 2009 he had also claimed responsibility for the bombing of an express train traveling from Moscow to St. Petersburg. These seem to mark the revival of the terrorist strategy pursued by Chechens in the early 2000s under the command of Basayev, a veteran Islamic separatist. Though the Islamist phenomenon is a late addition, the quest for Chechen independence is not new.

Chechens have a history of continuous opposition to Russian governance, starting with the Russian conquest of the Caucasus at the end of the 18th century. The Chechens are not just another of Russia's "grumbling subject nationalities";¹ in fact they have been a serious

¹ See, Valery Tishkov, *Ethnicity, Nationalism and Conflict in and after the Soviet Union: The Mind Aflame*, London: Sage, 1997.

challenger to the Russians historically. They spearheaded resistance to Russian expansionism into the Caucasus in the 18th and 19th centuries. In 1858 Russia defeated Imam Shamil and his fighters who were aiming to establish an Islamic state. After the 1917 Russian Revolution, a declaration of independence by the Chechens was met with occupation from the Bolsheviks. External rule, first by the Russian Czarist Empire and then by the Soviets, was unpopular among the Chechens, who followed a different set of cultural and religious beliefs. In 1944, accusing the Chechens of collaborating with the invading Nazis,² Stalin ordered the deportation of some 6, 00000 Chechen and Ingush citizens to Central Asia. A third died in the way. In 1957, Nikita Khrushchev allowed the deported Chechens to return home. However, many of those who returned home, found their homes inhabited by ethnic Russians. Historical grievances against Russia profoundly embedded in Chechen society turned out to be a major cause for the perpetuation of the conflict with Russia. The humiliation and hardships of exile left an indelible impression on their minds. This legacy helps explain why Chechen nationalism has been more radical and anti-Russian than that of Russia's other Muslim ethnic minorities.

After their return from exile, many Chechens were socially and politically dissatisfied. One of the consequences of deportation was a higher level of criminality. Feelings of inter-ethnic tension and distrust persisted, on the level of the local population in the republic itself and in some border territories, especially among Chechens living in Dagestan and in North Ossetia. The employment situation was critical, as were the environmental and social problems in several areas, especially in oil-processing centres. The failure of the Russian authorities to address many of these problems, coupled with the disenchantment of the Chechen people with the Russian state created a favorable condition for the emergence of a nationalistic movement. Like any nationalism, Chechen nationalism needed a charismatic and popular leader to express its will and interests in an articulate manner. The emergence of Dzhokar Dudayev marked a milestone in the history of the Chechen conflict.

General Dzhokhar Dudayev,³ seizing power in the capital Grozny in 1991, led Chechnya's drive for independence, after a number of regions managed to break away

² After the Soviets came to power, many Western imperial powers cooperated to try to overthrow the Communist regime. From the perspective of the Soviets then, a ring of steel was surrounding them preventing implementation of their system. Stalin perceived a threat from "external powers manipulating internal ethnic groups" and his reaction was brutal towards these ethnic groups viz., Volga Germans, Chechens, Crimean Tatars, Ingushes and Chechens. He believed Chechens would welcome Nazi-Germany in return for an independent Chechnya.

³ There were petitions from influential Chechens, including Doka Zavgayev, head of the old political elite, to the Russian leadership to make 'just one Chechen a Soviet General'. This demand was accepted in 1990, when Dudayev received the rank of General.

and gain independence following the Soviet Union's collapse. On November 1, 1991 Dudayev published a decree on the declaration of sovereignty of the Chechen Republic. At the beginning of June 1992, Dudayev decided to expel Russian troops from Chechnya. Tensions between the Russian government and that of Chechen president Dzhokhar Dudayev escalated into warfare in late 1994. Russia, which had never recognized the Chechen declaration of independence, moved troops into Chechnya on 11 December 1994. The protracted war that ensued inflicted enormous damage on Chechen society and Grozny was almost destroyed. Russia too suffered from the two Chechen wars between 1994 and 2000, not only in terms of the number of soldiers killed, but in many other ways:

- The war encouraged the forces opposed to Russia's brief experiment with liberal democracy. Media censorship and persecution of alleged anti-nationals became common.
- The power of the military and security apparatus grew.
- Chechnya became the rallying point for global Islamic Jihadists.

Chechnya's sufferings as a consequence of the two wars became a "lightning rod" for Wahhabi militants and other militant Islamic groups who became increasingly drawn to the conflict. Their intrusion in the Chechen society was facilitated by the fact that Chechnya was almost destroyed in the war and the devastation of the war had made the Chechens extremely vulnerable to these religious bigots. The separatist movement has since taken on an increasingly religious dimension.⁴ Chechen resistance fighters draw inspiration from the Afghan Mujahidin and their struggle against the Soviet military. Further, they are inspired by the Islamic belief that those who give their lives for the cause are martyrs and would go straight to heaven. Their objective is not an independent Chechen state, but instead an Islamic state in the North Caucasus that would include Chechnya, Dagestan and Ingushetia.

The violence has now spread from Chechnya to other mainly Muslim regions under the influence of the Islamists.⁵ By the estimates of Memorial, a human-rights organisation, at least 289 Russian soldiers and policemen were killed and 551 wounded in 2010. About the same number of people died in 2009.⁶ Illustrative of the Islamic phenomenon are Chechen suicide bombers, especially women suicide bombers (named Black Widows by the Russian and international press), who are religiously motivated and seek to

⁴ See, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/the-big-question-why-does-the-conflict-between-russia-and-chechnya-show-no-sign-of-ending-1933796.html>.

⁵ <http://pulitzercenter.org/video/north-caucasus-russia-killing-zone-islamist-insurgency-chechnya>.

⁶ <http://www.economist.com/node/18527550>.

become martyrs. For instance, the 2010 Moscow subway blasts were carried out by Black Widows. Given below is the list of major suicide attacks carried out by the Chechen separatists.

Table 2: Major Suicide Terror Attacks Attributed to Chechen Separatists Involving Female Terrorists

	Date	Place	Total Terrorists	Female Terrorists	Male Terrorists	Fatalities	Injured Victims	Host ages	Terrorists' outcome
1	Feb. 5, 2002	Chechnya, Grozny,	1	1	0	23	17	0	Wounded
2	Oct. 23-26, 2002	Moscow, Dubrovka Theater	40	19	21	129	644	<800	Dead
3	Dec. 27, 2002	Chechnya, Grozny, governmental complex	3	1	2	83	<200	0	Dead
4	May 12, 2003	Chechnya, Znamenskaya, governmental complex	3	1	2	59	111	0	Dead
5	May 14, 2003	Chechnya,	2	2	0	18	145	0	Dead
6	Dec. 5, 2003	Southern Russian near Yessentuki, train	4	3	1	41	<150	0	Dead
7	Aug. 25, 2004	Airplane TU-134 Moscow-Volgograd	1	1	0	43	0	0	Dead
8	Aug. 25, 2004	Airplane TU-154 Moscow-Sochi	1	1	0	42	0	0	Dead
9	Sept. 1-3, 2004	North Osetia, Beslan school	32	2	30	330	470	1120	Dead
10	March 29, 2010	Moscow Subway	2	2	–	40	–	–	Dead
	Total		89	33	56	808	1737	1920	

Source: Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), Tel Aviv, Israel

The spread of radical Islam in Chechnya has raised a question mark over the stability of the Russian state. Russia has three choices – recognize the independence of Chechnya, suppress the secessionist forces or bargain for better federal relations within the ambit of the Russian constitution to resolve the Chechen separatist problem.

As far as the first choice is concerned it can be said that Russia cannot afford to allow Chechnya to secede. Because, if Chechnya secedes, it is feared that the experiment may be replicated in other adjoining republics, undermining Russia's territorial integrity. Moreover, resurgent Russia's economy is fuelled by its energy- gas sector and Chechnya is important from this perspective. A major pipeline carries oil from fields in Baku on the Caspian Sea and Chechnya towards the Ukraine; Grozny's major oil refineries are also along this pipeline. Russia's interest to ensure its oil needs are met has led her to be more concerned that pipeline discussions by major western oil companies involve Russia. As long as Chechnya is a part of the Russian Federation, Russia would have a say in the oil coming through it.⁷

The second choice involves coercion and is fraught with the danger of inviting retaliation from the Chechens who are not alone in their fight against the Russian central authority. The increasing solidarity among the north Caucasian Muslim republics and the ascendancy of the Islamists in the region place a serious question mark over Russia's willingness to push itself into another war. War entails serious implications for the Russian state as Kalmykov (Russia's former Minister of Justice) who resigned from his post to protest his government's intervention in Chechnya predicted the whole Caucasus (see map below) would rise up over a war in Chechnya in solidarity with Chechnya. He had said: "It is impossible to frighten the Chechen republic with military preparations. If any actions are undertaken against this republic the whole North Caucasus will revolt. Nobody will politely ask permission from the leader of the republics for such actions".⁸ What he said then holds good particularly today when the idea of jihad has struck roots in the north Caucasus. Further, such a conflict has the potential to escalate and involve other republics in Russia as well as other countries. As Fiona Hill had rightly observed in the late 1990s: "The North Caucasus is a tinderbox where a conflict in one republic has the potential to spark a regional conflagration that will spread beyond its borders into the rest of the Russian Federation and will invite the involvement of Georgia,

⁷ See, <http://www.globalissues.org/article/100/crisis-in-chechnya>.

⁸ Yuri Kalmykov, "Will Russia Ever Pursue a New Nationalities Policy?" *Rossiskaya Gazeta* January 6, 1993; quoted in Paula Garb, "Ethnicity, Alliance Building and the Limited Spread of Ethnic Conflict in the Caucasus," in David A. Lake and Donald Rothchild (eds.), *The International Spread of Ethnic Conflict: Fear, Diffusion and Escalation*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998.

Azerbaijan, Turkey, and Iran, and their north Caucasian Diasporas".⁹ The bordering countries of Russia like Georgia, Azerbaijan, Turkey, and Iran have sizable Muslim populations sympathetic to their fellow brethren in the north Caucasus and will be closely watching Russian moves.

The third choice entails skillful use of democratic politics and appears to be the most desirable one. Here, the Putin's logic that in a crisis-ridden state democracy can be delayed does not appear to be convincing in the present scenario, when Russia seems to have emerged stronger than ever before. Russia, should therefore explore the possibility of strengthening the democratic process in Chechnya and elsewhere in the country without much delay. Delaying democracy can be counterproductive. In the short term, democracy provides a chance for disgruntled elements to engage in anti-state protests and insurgency. But suppression may not be a viable conflict resolution method. Broad based and consensual democracies are often better at problem solving than autocracies. It is democracy which often leads to a stable polity and has better chances of resolving secessionist conflicts.¹⁰ The efforts of Chechnya's Moscow-backed leader Ramzan Kadyrov, who has instilled some sense of confidence in the Chechens about the federal authorities, is seen as a step in the direction of better federal relations, although many analysts believe that Russia is getting over dependent on Kadyrov in its bid to restore peace in Chechnya and that Kadyrov is running the republic as his personal fiefdom.

The protracted nature of the conflict in Chechnya has radicalized positions on both sides and makes a federal solution along the lines of Tatarstan¹¹ appear remote in the immediate future. Violence is escalating in Chechnya and adjoining areas with more and extensive attacks on civilian targets and the range of unprotected, civilian targets and victims continues to be extended. None of the strategies and tactics of the key stakeholders in this conflict appear to be leading the situation closer to peace and stability. Many analysts attribute the powerful force of ethno-nationalism behind the disintegration of Russia's predecessor state the erstwhile USSR. Russia is also witnessing similar if not the same undercurrent of tension in some of its republics.

⁹ Hill, Fiona "Russia's Tinderbox": Conflict in the North Caucasus and its Implications for the Future of the Russian Federation," Strengthening Democratic Institutions Project. September, Cambridge: Harvard University John F. Kennedy School of Government. Quoted in Paula Garb, "Ethnicity, Alliance Building and the Limited Spread of Ethnic Conflict in the Caucasus" in David A. Lake and Donald Rothchild (eds.), *The International Spread of Ethnic Conflict: Fear, Diffusion and Escalation*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998.

¹⁰ Rajan Kumar, Centre for Russian & Central Asian Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi "Putin's Legacy and the State of Democracy in Russia", Draft Paper.

¹¹ The signing of a treaty between Russia and Tatarstan in February 1994 led to the peaceful resolution of one of the two most serious conflicts of the Russian Federation. For details, see James Hughes and Gwerdolyn Sasse, *Ethnicity and Territory in the Former Soviet Union: Regions in Conflict*, London: Frank Press, 2002.

