Table 2: Ideological Division in the North Caucasus in 2000s

	East	West
Geographical division	Chechnya Dagestan Ingushetia	Adygea Kabardino-Balkaria Karachaevo-Cherkessia North Ossetia
Major ideological trends	Radical Islam Moderate Islam	Nationalism Radical Islam Moderate Islam Traditionalistic Islam
Historical differences in the approach to Islam	Islamic Imamate (1829–1859)	Islamic-nationalistic Circassian state (1861–1864)
Practical differences in the approach to Islam	Shaafi school	Hanafi school
Religion	Islam	Christianity and Islam
External influence	No diasporas	Large diasporas

ANALYSIS

The Insurgency in the North Caucasus: Putting Religious Claims into Context

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Abstract

After the Boston bombings, the media has portrayed the insurgency in the North Caucasus as being part of the global Salafi jihad fighting against the West. This statement was quickly refuted by the leader of the Caucasus Emirate (CE) and the Dagestani insurgency. This report discusses the nature of the insurgent and terrorist groups in the North Caucasus in order to understand their links with global Salafi jihad, and the rationale behind their violent actions against the Russian state. It argues that the link between the CE and international jihadists has been overblown and that the insurgency is mainly driven by recurrent structural problems reinforced by a growing resurgence of radical Islam in the North Caucasus. In terms of international security, the conflict in the region remains mainly an internal Russian problem and the emphasis should not be put on the link between the Emirate and al-Qaeda, rather it should focus on events such as the upcoming Sochi Olympics.

Ideological Features of the Insurgency: The Importance of Anti-Western Sentiment and Global Salafi Jihad

In 2007, Doku Umarov proclaimed the establishment of the Caucasus Emirate, a pan-Caucasian Islamic structure, in order to replace the nationalist insurgent structure of the Chechen republic of Ichkeria. Umarov's discourse started to integrate more references to Islam, including references to the importance of jihad against non-believers that oppose Muslims and the instauration of Sharia in the North Caucasus. Western countries and Israel were labelled as enemies of the Ummah and by the same token of the Emirate. At the same time, CE leaders always remained focused on the Russian state and its local proxies as their main targets. Therefore, the anti-western rhetoric never really materialized further than in its discursive form inspired by al-Qaeda.

At a more local level, the insurgent groups across the North Caucasus (Dagestan, Chechnya, Ingushetia, and Kabardino-Balkaria) have occasionally released state-

ments in support of the global Salafi jihad and its anti-western nature. Nonetheless the main thrust of their targets and strategies has been on the immediate and local objectives. Due to the structural conditions inside the insurgency and the limited communication between the different cells, local rebel groups enjoy a great level of autonomy in their everyday operations. As a result of its lack of a strong hierarchical structure, the CE also cannot impose a single ideological platform onto its local cells across the region.

Therefore, the insurgency forms a loose confederation of insurgents and criminal groups fighting the local and federal governments for a diverse set of reasons. These range from religious grievances to simple greed. The role of the CE's central command structure is to set out the main ideological platform for the movement which is then used by local insurgents to justify their struggle against the Russian troops and their proxy forces in the region. As a result of this loose ideological structure factors such as personal vendettas, criminal activities and local issues play a more significant role than ideological Islamic grievances in the daily dynamics of this insurgency movement. This also explains why we have not observed a greater degree of strategic coordination across the different terrorist attacks carried out by the insurgency in the North Caucasus since the establishment of the CE. In fact, at the operational and tactical level, the establishment of the Emirate did not have a great deal of impact on the strategies used by the different groups on the ground. For example, in Chechnya, the local insurgent groups have continued to engage in guerilla warfare against the Russian military forces and the pro-Russian Chechen forces. Similarly, these groups have continued to target military objectives rather than softer targets.

Umarov's stance on civilian casualties and the role of suicide bombings has however changed since April 2009 when the Russian administration announced the end of the counter-terrorist operation in Chechnya. Between 2009 and the beginning of 2012, the Caucasus Emirate was responsible for over 30 suicide bombings including the infamous attacks on the Moscow Metro system in March 2010 and Domodedovo airport in January 2011. The willingness and the capacity to engage in suicide bombings was not a strategic decision of the Emirate, rather it was driven by local cells and individual leaders in each republic. For example, Said Buryatsky was instrumental in launching the first wave of attacks following the creation of the CE mainly focused on targets in Ingushetia and Chechnya. After his death in 2010, Dagestan insurgents became the leading figures in the use of suicide bombings in the North Caucasus, and across Russia such as the bombing of the Moscow transit system.

In order to understand the development and dynamics of the insurgency, a closer analysis of the development of the insurgent groups outside of Chechnya is needed. Indeed, one can observe very different patterns of grievances, recruitment, and insurgency tactics across the different republics of the North Caucasus. This casts doubt on the narrative about the hierarchical nature of the Caucasus Emirate and the role played by its Chechen core leaders.

Realities on the Ground: A Loose Confederation of Insurgent Groups

Although the conflict is often portrayed as one mainly driven by Chechen insurgents, violence has moved away from Chechnya and towards Dagestan, Ingushetia, and Kabardino-Balkaria following the creation of the CE. In 2009, the level of violence, in terms of death and insurgent attacks per republic, was no longer topped by Chechnya, with Dagestan and Ingushetia replacing it in the rankings. This phenomenon is often attributed to Abdul-Khalim Sadulayev and Shamil Basayev's spillover strategy which sought to fight the Russian forces across the region. However, when one looks into the local dynamics and strategies in each republic, a very different situation is observed. Each republic shares important structural problems, such as high unemployment, corruption, nepotism, and a lack of political and judicial accountability, which in turn fuels popular resentment against local and federal elites. However, the specific strategies deployed by the different insurgent groups develop in response to and relation with the particular policies adopted by the local elites for dealing with such groups. In this context, Salafism becomes not so much a brainwashing mechanism, but an alternative way for disenchanted young people, unhappy with the levels of corruption, limited social mobility and unemployment, to express their frustrations and grievances against the situation on the ground. Insurgent groups provide them with a sense of community, shared purpose, protection against the lawlessness of the state, and even a new social identity outside of the current confines of society.

In the case of the most unstable republic in the region, Dagestan, the insurgency is structured along sectarian cleavages between traditional Islam represented by the official clergy and Salafism. Rebels thus seek to establish parallel structures from the state, for example, through a form of unofficial taxation (racketeering) in the name of the Islamic tax (zakat), an underground religious structure, and the targeting of infidels (kafirs). In fact, although Umarov announced a lull in the targeting of civilians in the North Caucasus in February 2012, the Dagestan insurgency cells have remained committed to their struggle against the state framed along sectarian

lines and in order to impose sharia law in the republic. Such groups are most active in the urban centers, mainly in the capital Makhachkala, where they also compete with security forces for the control of criminal activities. At the same time, the level of coordination between the different insurgency cells remains very minimal making it extremely difficult for the government to eradicate the movement.

In Kabardino-Balkaria and Ingushetia, insurgent violence has emerged primarily as the result of the high level of state repression imposed on the ordinary population. In the case of Kabardino-Balkaria, the repression was aimed against those that followed a more radical practice of Islam often in response to the launch of the Second Chechen war. Indeed, the insurgency has remained largely reactive to the brutalization tactics and abuses perpetrated by the local regime. After a major uprising supported by Chechen rebels in Nalchik in 2005, radical Muslims have gone underground. However, in the last few years, rebel groups have once again revved up their activities by focusing their attacks on police forces, rather than civilian targets or the use of suicide attacks, as witnessed in Dagestan and Ingushetia. The religious factor for the insurgency groups in Kabardino-Balkaria is much stronger than in Ingushetia and Chechnya; at the same time violence is not solely structured along sectarian lines as in the case of Dagestan. The insurgency network in the republic remains very dependent on its key leaders, leaving its structure extremely vulnerable to major counter-terrorist operations.

In the case of Ingushetia, its ex-President, Murat Zyazikov (2002–2009), had instigated a major campaign of repression against his political opponents in the name of fighting against radical groups that supported Chechen insurgents. His approach was similar to the methods adopted by Kadyrov's militia in neighbouring Chechnya, such as mop-up operations, extrajudicial killings and abductions. He targeted Chechen refugee camps in order to prevent them from becoming safe havens for insurgents and potential Islamic fighters. However, the force and level of brutality perpetrated by the regime has had an opposite effect by pushing more people into the insurgency camp. In turn, cycles of vendettas and revenge between the different clans and individuals have pushed the republic closer to the edge of catastrophe. Therefore, in Ingushetia, the role of Salafism in the emergence and continuation of this form of violence remains marginal as the rebels continue to frame the majority of their grievances along ethnic and kinship lines. The new administration under Yunus-Bek Yevkurov has in turn tried to engage in a peaceful dialogue with the opposition helping to limit rebel recruitment. Several successful counter-terrorist operations against high-value targets have also helped to weaken the vertical command structure of the insurgency in the republic.

Contrary to the depiction in some alarmist reports, the insurgency in the North Caucasus is not driven by the global Salafi jihad nor is the insurgency primarily made up of foreign Islamic mercenaries. Whilst one should not underestimate the threat posed by Salafism to the security of the North Caucasus and Russia in general, it is important to contextualize the deep-seated local nature of the insurgency in the region. What drives ordinary people to join insurgency movements and to challenge the government is not the will to establish a Caliphate but the need to challenge a corrupted and ossified society. Dagestan remains the only republic where the violence is unfolding along sectarian lines, and even here their recruitment primarily targets the local disenchanted youth. If the ideology of the CE is aimed at depicting the conflict as primarily part of the global jihadi movement, the reality on the ground demonstrates that the growing importance of Salafism is rather circumstantial and should not be seen as the cause of the problem. If the North Caucasus is not actually linked with the global salafi jihad, then what threat does it represent for international security?

International Security and the Emirate: the Sochi Olympics and the Next International Jihad Front?

As we have seen in the case of the Tsarnaev brothers, the North Caucasus remains rather indifferent to the far enemy (USA, Israel) as long as their struggle against the Russian state and its local proxies prevails. The main concern in terms of security remains the threat of terrorist attacks during the hosting of the Sochi Winter Olympics in 2014. Since the current focus of the CE leadership is on their struggle against the Russian state it would be surprising if they chose to target Western athletes during the event. Whilst such a scenario remains possible, it would probably involve a radical splinter cell loosely associated with the CE and most likely funded or supported by an al-Qaeda network, with the focus of the attack most likely to be on Moscow than during the Olympics itself. The Russian authorities have substantially increased the level of security around the Olympic complex and tightly control the access to the region; as a result this scenario remains unlikely. It would also be surprising to see a direct collaboration between the leaders of the Emirate and a foreign jihadist network as it would risk alienating foreign support, as in the case of the Beslan attack in 2004.

A more probable scenario is that the CE decides to attack a soft target outside of the North Caucasus region,

such as transport infrastructure or a symbol of the Russian state, in order to remind the world about their struggle against Moscow. The recent events at the Domodedovo airport and the Moscow metro demonstrate that the insurgency remains able to conduct major attacks outside of the North Caucasus.

At this point, the Caucasus Emirate, in its short existence, remains primarily a threat to Moscow`s local proxies in the region. Certain analysts have insisted that the North Caucasus will become a key battlefield for the global jihad movement after the departure of American troops from Afghanistan and Iraq. However, this scenario did not materialize with the Arab spring and the crisis in Mali taking most of the influx from foreign fighters. Although the CE leaders continue to present the conflict in the North Caucasus as part of the global jihad, in practice it remains primarily driven by local issues and is largely forgotten by the various Islamist networks. Whilst several members of the North Caucasian Diaspora in Europe and in North America have chosen to join jihadist groups in Syria, Afghanistan, and in North Africa, with some even plotting terrorist attacks in the West, this phenomenon remains mostly associated with home-grown radicalisation. The resources of several insurgent groups remain entirely focused on the struggle inside the North Caucasus. The risk to international security from the CE should not be exaggerated despite the inflammatory discourses from the CE leaders and their propaganda websites.

The actual social and political situation in the region, coupled with the growing tension in the Arab world and in Moscow, has however created some of the pre-conditions for a possible social uprising involving several divergent political forces in the North Caucasus. According to this scenario, the extremist factions associated with Salafist movements might try to capitalize on mass protests in order to establish an Islamic state; this could lead to an Egyptian/Syrian type scenario in Dagestan and maybe across the region. Until, and if, this scenario ever materialises or the Russian state initiates real structural reforms in the region, low-level insurgency will persist, without turning into a major conflict.

About the Author

Jean-François Ratelle is a postdoctoral fellow at the George Washington University. His research interests include the use of ethnographic research methodologies in the study of civil war and the ongoing insurgency in the North Caucasus. His recent and forthcoming publications include "Making Sense of Violence in Civil War: Challenging Academic Narratives through Political Ethnography" *Critical Studies on Security* (forthcoming) and "How Participant Observation Contributes to the Study of (In)security Practices in Conflict Zones" Mark Salter & Can Mtulu (eds.) 2012, *Research Methods in Critical Security Studies: An Introduction,* Routledge (PRIO New Security Studies series).