Dagestan and the War Next Door

Roschchin, Dr. Mikhail IU.

Boston University Center for the Study of Conflict, Ideology, and Policy

http://hdl.handle.net/2144/3580

Boston University
PERSPECTIVE
Volume 11, No 1 (September-October 2000)

Dagestan and the War Next Door

By DR. MIKHAIL IU. ROSHCHIN(1)
Institute of Oriental Studies (RAN)

The problem of religious pluralism in Dagestan, particularly as it relates to the appearance of what has been termed "Wahhabism," had a direct bearing on the armed confrontations of August 1999 which sparked the current war in Chechnya. Last August, "Wahhabis" and other radical Islamic groups staged an incursion from Chechnya into border regions of Dagestan, with the intention of inspiring an Islamic revolution. After those efforts were suppressed, the Russian forces crossed the border into Chechnya in the first days of October 1999, starting the second Russian-Chechen war. A close analysis of the August events can shed light on the origins of the present war and on the complex situation in Dagestan.

The 1990s brought with them a genuine religious renaissance in the Republic of Dagestan (RD), mostly among Muslims. Today in RD there are 1,700 Muslims congregations (which constitute more than one-half of Muslim congregations in all of Russia).(2)

Most local Muslims are Sunni with a traditional inclination to Sufi Islam. There are three Sufi brotherhoods in Dagestan: Naqshbandia, Qadiria and Shadhilia. During the Soviet time, Sufi brotherhoods were forbidden. Now the brotherhoods have reemerged and with them there is a proliferation of sheikhs (elders). The most influential sheikh of Dagestan is Said-efendi of Chirkey, an ethnic Avar, the largest ethnic group in Dagestan.(3) His disciples, mostly Avars, control the Spiritual Board of Muslims in Dagestan (SBMD) and wield significant political authority. Some Sufi sheikhs have close
connections with other Dagestani ethnic groups: Muhammad Mukhtar is a Kumyk, Serajuddin is a Tabaseran, Tajuddin is an Andi (from the village Ashali).

At the beginning of the 1990s, attempts were made to create Muslim boards for each of the separate ethnic communities in Dagestan. Kumyks, Dargins and Laks took steps to form their own administrations. The process came to a halt in February 1994, when the Dagestan Supreme Soviet ruled that there should be only one Islamic administration for the republic, as in the Soviet era. Since then, the SBMD has controlled (or tried to control) all the activity of registered mosques, both the majority Sunni and the minority Shi'ite. The SBMD acts to a certain extent as a Dagestani state church, similar to the Russian Orthodox Church's Moscow Patriarchate. Just as the patriarchate lobbied hard for the new federal law on religion, finally signed by President Yel'tsin in September 1997, so the board has been lobbying the Dagestan People's Assembly for a similar law to strengthen its already quasi-governmental status.

Traditional Sufi Islam is first of all spiritually directed and interprets "jihad" as the personal self-improvement of a believer. Radical Muslims, or the supporters of "pure Islam," appeared in Dagestan at the end of the 1980s. By the second half of the 1990s, this movement had adopted a more formal structure and today it is called the "Muslim Jama'at" (Muslim community). The spiritual leader and main representative of the radical Muslims (the so-called "Wahhabis") is Bagauddin Magomedov. He told me, "We do not want to seize power, we want all power to be in the hands of Allah. For us, geographic and state borders have no significance, we work and act in those places where it is possible for us to do so. Dagestan today is being governed from Moscow; we do not have an Islamic society like that which exists in Chechnya."

It is true that Chechnya, although never formally recognized, has become the first "Islamic state" to be declared on the territory of the former USSR. However, the supporters of the "Muslim Jama'at" model themselves more on the Taliban state of Afghanistan and the Sudan.
Bagauddin, an ethnic Khvarshin who was proclaimed as "Amir of Muslim Jama'at," told me in July 1997 that the post-communist government of Dagestan was "in a state of shirk (paganism). We would approve a total ban on the sale of alcohol, but for us our iman (faith) and tawhid (monotheism) are much more important. We would employ the services of the muhtasibin (moral police) in an Islamic state. For us the use of tobacco and drugs is considered to be haram (forbidden)."

Starting in 1993, Bagauddin and his closest associates, who were based in the town of Kyzilyurt near Makhachkala, were subjected to systematic discrimination and repression by the government and by representatives of the traditional Sufi Islam. In the fall of 1997, Bagauddin and his closest associates retreated to Chechnya, calling this voyage a "hijra" in an allusion to the Prophet Mohammed's journey from Mecca to Medina in the year 622. The growing alienation of the "Wahhabi" movement from the rest of Dagestani society contributed to the radicalization of the movement.

To a large extent the beliefs of the Jama'at movement were put into practice in 1997-1999 in the villages of Karamakhi and Chabanmakhi, located in the Buinansk region in the central part of Dagestan. The majority of the villages' inhabitants accepted the ideology of this radical movement, and the local Muslim community (which had its mosque in the village of Karamakhi) became a tiny "Wahhabi" republic the advance guard of radical Islam in Dagestan. Young people in search of "pure Islam" flocked to these villages from all over Dagestan and other republics of the Northern Caucasus.

While the villagers respected Bagauddin as their moral and ideological authority, they looked to Habib Abd al-Rahman Ibn al-Khattab as their military authority. Khattab, a Jordanian by birth, even lived in Karamakhi before the war in Chechnya broke out in December 1994. His closest ally, who led the defense of Karamakhi and Chabanmakhi, is Jarulla Rajbaddinov.
In July and August 1999, a researcher from Moscow's Institute of Oriental Studies spent several weeks visiting this community. The researcher, who has asked to remain anonymous, agreed to share his impressions here.

[Narrative start]

"Along the narrow stony road leading to the village of Karamakhi, signs warned me that I was in independent Islamic territory where no law other than Sharia law was observed. At the entrance to the village itself there was a roadblock, where I was stopped by several persons dressed in what appeared to be Russian army camouflage uniforms. It was almost impossible to make out their faces beneath their thick beards and caps pulled down low over their foreheads. Beyond the concrete blocks there was a high-calibre machine gun and somewhere nearby a radio transmitter was giving out information. I was asked a number of questions, mainly about my reasons for coming to the village, where I was from, and whether anyone in Karamakhi itself was expecting me. I was told apologetically that every new arrival was carefully screened, and that "Some people arrive, spend two or three days with us and then all kinds of rubbish is shown on television." "But if you have come to study Islam it means that Allah has led you here and we cannot stand in the way of His wishes," someone added.

However, my hosts warned me that I would be closely watched for some time, since no one apart from Allah had the power to know what my motives were. They showed me the way to the headquarters of Karamakhi, where there were some young people sitting around, who once again started to question me. This questioning lasted from midday until evening, apart from breaks for prayer. The questions remained the same, only the people asking them changed.

The following day I met Jarulla (the informal leader of the community) and his assistant Batyr. They told me that one of the "brothers" had just had a son and they invited me to come with them and congratulate the new father. They took me by jeep to a settlement up in the hills, where about 15 persons in camouflage were enthusiastically preparing shashlyk."
Gradually more and more "brothers" arrived; after about half an hour there were over a hundred. Following the formal celebration the "brothers" had a shooting contest. They placed thin wooden batons at a distance of around 100 meters and used them for target practice. All kinds of weapons came out, including automatic pistols, rifles, sniper guns, machine guns (they also had grenade discharger cups but did not use these). Jarulla favored a sawed-off shotgun and seemed to be able to hit the target without even aiming. It should be noted that at these "competitions" there was no excessive excitement or rivalry. The "brothers" were simply testing how accurately they could shoot, how prepared each of them was for a war with the infidels. Afterward they played football.

Towards evening we returned to the settlement, where a local commander, "Amir" Shamil, took me to his base, a large house defended by three camouflaged machine gunners. Shamil lined up the 25 members of the "jama'at." He announced that another "brother" had come to join them. They were young persons ranging in age from 18 to 30, who had begun to follow Allah. They quickly wrote down the main prayers for me (Arabic words written in Russian script) and warned me that, if I had not learned them by the following day, I could expect to get 10 lashes.

This "brotherhood" was made up of various persons: drifters, the unemployed, criminals, those avoiding military service and also those who had been brought by force to the "jama'at" by their friends in order to free them from alcohol or drug dependency. These people are afraid to return to their old haunts, back to "Jahilia" (ignorance). The drug rehabilitation program there was very simple: At the first sign of weakness, one would be beaten.

Members of the "jama'at" came from various ethnic groups such as Laks, Kumyks and Avars; almost half were Lezgins. Eventually I was accepted into the "Taliban" training program, which had two phases. The first was an ideological training course, involving study of the foundations of the faith; the underlying principle was that anyone who
carried arms must do so in the name of Allah. The second stage was military training.
Any activity must begin with the word "bismillah" (In the name of Allah).

Our daily routine was as follows: We would get up at about half past two in the morning, perform our ablutions and at around three say the early morning prayer. Afterwards we would study the Koran and learn surats by heart. At six we would begin our physical exercises a cross-country run of about six kilometers. On one of these runs three brothers fell behind and the amir rebuked them with the words, "If you are so slow here, how will you be able to take Moscow?" At eight we all had breakfast. There was a generous supply of food; according to the amir, bread alone cost 100 rubles a day. Each day a so-called "khidma," a team to cook and serve the meals, was appointed. Unfortunately, few of the "brothers" were good cooks.

After breakfast we had about half an hour to wash and to shave. Then we studied until the midday prayer. Afterwards we had lunch, rested for two to three hours and said the early evening prayer. Then we had more lessons in which alims (scholars) who had studied in Egypt, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Syria taught us about monotheism, giving detailed explanations of "ihsan" (excellence of behavior borne out of a strong love for God), "ibadat" (worship, obedience and service to God), and the daily prayer rituals. We also studied the "hadiths," which the storyteller had to know by heart. Often, especially on Fridays, we were shown documentary films about various zones of conflict between Muslims and "unbelievers." Apart from this there was a whole body of Islamic literature in the Russian language available for us to study independently. This included works by authors such as S. Qutb, M. Tagaev, Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, Abu Ala Maududi and Hassan al-Banna (the Egyptian founder of the Muslim Brotherhood). Before reading these works we were advised to concentrate on strengthening our own "iman" (faith). There was little time between the sunset and late evening prayers.

At the end of the three-week course we had examinations. Each "brother" had to learn 15 surats by heart and answer questions. Anyone who failed had to repeat the whole course. Those who passed could progress to the second phase, military training. This
involved the study of hand-to-hand combat, the use of a various firearms including antiaircraft guns, and mountain-combat tactics.

Nearly all the houses in Karamakhi and Chabanmakhi had radio receivers. I was able to watch videotaped footage of (former Interior Minister) Sergei Stepashin's August 1998 meeting with the villagers on local television. It should be said that as far as the villagers were concerned this was an explicit confirmation of their independence. Stepashin certainly appeared to be acknowledging this. When the Russian interior minister and his escort prepared to leave they were accompanied by cries of "Allahu Akbar" (God is great). The "Wahhabis" were openly proclaiming that they would accept only the Koran and the Sunna, not the Russian Constitution, as the basis for law. "[narrative ends]

At the beginning of August 1999 radical Muslims declared a *jihad* (holy war) for the liberation of Dagestan from the hands of non-believers.(4) The Chechen troop commander Shamil Basaev, amir of the North Caucasus liberation army, and the legendary commander Khattab are the military leaders of the jihad. Shamil Basaev distinguished himself by leading a raid on Budennovsk in 1995, following which the Russian leadership was forced to begin negotiations with the Chechens. In Chechnya, Shamil Basaev became a national hero, but in Dagestan he was not accepted as the leader of the jihad because leaders of holy wars, the imams, traditionally belonged to the Avar ethnic group.

Khattab is more popular with the Dagestani radical Muslims. He was born in 1963 into a well-known Cherkess family in Jordan. According to inhabitants of the village of Karamakhi, when he was only 15 years old he went to Afghanistan where he gained his first experience of military conflict. Then he graduated from military academy in Amman and served for several years in the "Cherkess guard" of King Hussein.(5) In his early 30s, Khattab moved to the Dagestan village of Karamakhi, where he married a local girl. According to local inhabitants, Khattab took part in the war in Bosnia, where he led a military training camp for local Muslims and presented a real threat to the Bosnian Serbs. From early 1995, Khattab was in Chechnya where he gradually became one of
the most influential military commanders. In spring 1996 his fighters mounted an ambush on the village of Iaryshmardy and destroyed a large Russian military convoy, killing more than 70 persons.(6)

After the end of the Chechen war in August 1996, Khattab set up a number of military training camps in Chechnya for the radical Muslims of the Northern Caucasus. Until the start of the present war, the main center for the training of warriors was situated on the outskirts of Serzhen-Yurt, not far from Grozny. It seems that the radical Muslims of Chechnya and Dagestan receive significant financial support from radical Muslim circles. There is evidence that they receive help from such organizations as the "World Jihad Front" and the Fund of the Muslim Brotherhood Party.(7)

**Botlikh**

By the beginning of August 1999, cross-border incidents between Dagestan and Chechnya were happening on an almost daily basis. Finally Basaev and Khattab chose the Botlikh rayon for the main thrust of their assault. They managed to attract supporters for the jihad from the Avar villages of Ansalta, Shodroda, Rakhata and Tando. In some of these villages, notably in Ansalta, there were significant groups of radical Muslim youths. The Islamic Republic of Dagestan was proclaimed after the rebel forces had seized the aforementioned villages in the Botlikh rayon. Basaev and Khattab's forces aimed to take Botlikh and continue along the main river, Andiiskoie Koisu, in order to take the village of Tlokh, which would open up the way to central Dagestan.

Although it is estimated that only around six to seven percent of the Dagestan population sympathize with these radical ideas, Khattab and Basaev probably counted on the support of a significant proportion of the local population, thinking that they would be seen as liberators. However, this did not happen. Quite the reverse: Local militias were immediately established in the neighboring villages which had not been seized by the rebels.
In Botlikh rayon the ethnic Andi(8) closed four mountain passes, the most important of which are Harami and Riqwani. The Andi people have for many years quarreled with Chechens about alpine pastures. A decision to resist the Islamists was made by the Andi jama'at societies of four villages: Andi, Gagatl', Riqwani and Ashali. (Andi people are strong adherents of Sufi Islam and detest "Wahhabism.") (9)

The lack of popular support for the "liberators" stemmed in part from the fact that traditional folk Islam, which is adhered to by the vast majority of Dagestan's Muslim believers, coexists poorly with radical fundamentalist Islam. In those villages where there are supporters of both trends, separate communities have formed, each with its own mosque. Moreover, the majority of the population of Dagestan is extremely hostile and suspicious of anything connected with so-called "Wahhabism." Here the word "Wahhabi" has derogatory and negative connotations. As a result of the events in Botlikh when the insurgents were defeated, an unexpected alliance was formed between the Dagestanis and the federals. Women in Botlikh treated Russian soldiers as if they were their own sons. Nothing of this nature ever happened in Chechnya.

Karamakhi-Chabanmakhi

The euphoria following the defeat of the radical Muslim forces in Botlikh rayon had scarcely evaporated when on the night of 28-29 August punitive measures were taken against the inhabitants of four villages: Karamakhi, Chabanmakhi, Kadar and Durangi, which a year and a half ago had declared themselves to be a special Muslim area governed by Sharia law. The villages were totally controlled by radical Muslims, the majority of whom are Dargins. The decision to mount this operation was passed on 25 August, the day Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin arrived in Dagestan. However, the decision was not made by him alone, but in conjunction with the chairman of the State Council of Dagestan, Magomedali Magomedov. These punitive measures violated the agreement reached in August 1998 between Stepashin and the inhabitants of the "Wahhabi" villages. Stepashin was warmly welcomed in the villages Karamakhi-Chabanmakhi, and even presented with a burka. Stepashin and the Wahhabis reached
a verbal agreement by which they would be allowed to live according to Sharia law but would refrain from proselytizing their views outside their community. The Botlikh events gave the federal side an opportunity to violate this agreement and dispose of the villages.

The local leader of these four villages and the director of their defenses was Khattab's closest comrade, Jarulla Rajbaddinov. The villages were extremely well-armed and their defenses were strong. They even had antiaircraft guns. The villages were in the foothills, near a dense forest, where the rebels could easily retreat should they be forced to wage a partisan war. However, after two weeks of armed struggle, the Russian military forces crushed the resistance in these villages, leaving few persons alive or buildings in place.

Many Dagestanis with whom I held discussions as to why this punitive action had been undertaken said that it would have been wiser to try and seek a compromise with the village inhabitants and persuade them to disarm voluntarily. There is every reason to think it would have been possible to reach an agreement, as Stepashin had a year earlier, particularly since the events in Botlikh demonstrated that radical Muslims could not count on general support from the society and that the confrontation could lead to disaster. Instead of a negotiated solution, the punitive operation against the inhabitants of these villages has encouraged a new wave of activity from Basaev and Khattab, whose forces entered Novolaksky rayon on 5 September 1999.

**Novolaksky rayon**

This time Basaev's and Khattab's units were comprised mostly of Chechens, and they rode to within five kilometers of Khasavyurt. Had they reached Khasavyurt the situation could have become very serious because there they would have been able to count on the assistance of local Chechens (Akkin Chechens)(10) who constitute more than one-third of the city's population. If they had taken the city, the fate of the jihad would have unfolded in a completely different way: Khasavyurt opens up the road to Makhachkala,
where defenses were already being readied on the city’s outskirts. Instead, by the middle of September the Chechen units sustained heavy casualties and had to withdraw into Chechnya.

This attempt to start a jihad in Dagestan was perceived by most of the population as aggression organized by Chechnya’s extremist circles. For this reason the local militias helped the federal forces against the "mujahadin." In general, the idea of jihad (or "gazawat" as it was called in the North Caucasus) is hardly alien to the Dagestani consciousness. It is particularly viable among the Avars, Dargins, Laks and Akkin Chechens. The gazawat was always led by an imamat whose authority extended to many nationalities. The last five imams, the most famous of which was Imam Shamil, were Avars.

For the Avars it is inconceivable that the next imam could be a Chechen. But to some degree, as "amir," Basaev had pretensions to the role of imam. For most Dagestanis, Basaev's image robs the idea of the jihad of any allure. Chechnya, the only Islamic state in the post-Soviet space, did not behave according even to a loose interpretation of Muslim canons, which prohibit attack on fellow Muslims. Perhaps it is the negative example of the Chechen state of 1997-1999 that cured Dagestanis of any illusion about having their own "Islamic state." Certainly the armed conflicts of August-September 1999 persuaded all the Dagestanis, regardless of nationality, that they had something to defend. The war against Basaev and Khattab united members of different nationalities and became an important factor in the formation of a Dagestani identity.

The incursion of radical Muslims from Chechnya into Dagestan and President Aslan Maskhadov's refusal to dissociate himself fully from Basaev by firing him from among the Chechen commanders and bringing him to trial(11) opened the way to the second Chechen war. In Dagestan itself this war is a difficult period for all Muslims (not only "Wahhabis") who do not agree with the policy of total control realized by the Spiritual Board of Muslims in Dagestan and its protector, Sheikh Said-efendi of Chirkey. Today security agents seize any young man suspected of being "Wahhabi." Now is a very
difficult time even for other sheikhs who are not connected with Said-efendi; many fear that persecution is quite probable. I could mention my good friend, the sheikh of the Naqshbandia brotherhood, Abdulwahid from Habshchi, who told me last summer that he was really oppressed by *murids* (disciples) of Said-efendi and was afraid to live in Makhachkala. It seems that the authorities in Makhachkala have interpreted the lack of popular support for the Wahhabis and a willingness to side with the government against the Chechens as license to suppress further all competing strands of Islamic faith. This can only lead to further alienation and intolerance between the official Spiritual Board of Muslims in Dagestan and various representatives of the whole spectrum of belief.

Notes:

1. This paper is based on my field research and includes a narrative from a colleague who wishes to remain anonymous. I would like to thank the fellows of Keston Institute, Ms. Geraldine Fagan and Ms. Tatiana Titova, for helping me to prepare the original English version of this paper.
2. These data were given to me by the Committee for Religious Affairs of the Republic of Dagestan in June 1999.
3. According to the 1989 census, the population of Dagestan was 27.5% Avar, 15.5% Dargin, 12.9% Kumyk, 12.4% Lezgin, 9.2% Russian, 5.1% Lak, 4.3% Tabaseran, 4.2% Azeri, 3.2% Chechen, etc.
5. V. Paukov, E. Lefko, "Voinny Allaha Choose the Caucasus," *Vremya MN*, September 1999; cited in the weekly *Mir za nedelu* (Moscow) No. 1, 28 August - 9 September 1999. According to other sources, Khattab is a citizen of Saudi Arabia. Some who have met him say he is fairly well educated, for instance he uses computer analysis to plan his operations.

8. The Andi people were not included in the census but are estimated to number about 40,000. In recent years they have become more politically assertive, seeking greater language rights and to be added to Dagestan's titular nationalities and represented on its state council.

9. This information was kindly given me by Prof. Mamaikhan Aglarov who visited Andi villages at the time of the events in Dagestan a year ago.

10. Akkin Chechens are one of the 14 titular nationalities of Dagestan.

11. Akhmad Kadyrov, the mufti of Chechnya and now the head of the pro-Russian administration of Chechnya, advocated such actions. See Mikhail Roshchin, "Who holds the keys to the Chechen problem?" Central Asia and the Caucasus (Sweden), No. 2 (2000), p. 15. Maskhadov did make a statement saying that Basaev and other Chechens involved in the incursion were acting as private citizens, certainly not on the behalf of the Chechen government, but unfortunately he could not find more resolute condemnation of this action.