

The Impact of Foreign Salafi-Jihadists on Islamic Developments in Chechnya and Dagestan¹

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ABSTRACT

This article intends to revisit the role of foreign fighters in the Chechen war and its aftermath, looking particularly at their impact on Islamic developments in Chechnya and Dagestan during the 1990s–2010s. The article challenges the argument, which is predominant in the literature, that foreign *jihadists* were primarily responsible for transforming the Chechen insurgency from a secular movement into a religious one. Instead, it argues that Islamist tendencies and Salafi circles were present in the North Caucasus before the outbreak of the First Chechen war. Secondly, this article contends that local Salafi *jamaats*, in conjunction with foreign jihadist fighters, provided the mobilization structures and the ideological framing for the radicalization of the Chechen/ North Caucasus rebel movement. By examining the Salafi-*jihadist* discourse of both foreign and local Salafis operating in Chechnya and Dagestan in the 1990s and 2000s, the article shows how foreign Salafis influenced and helped shape the ideological framing of local Salafi politicians and rebel *jihadist* groups. Yet, this article also shows that many of these Salafi-*jihadist* projects failed to gain broader societal support. They did not resonate with the local populations in Chechnya and Dagestan in the 1990s–2000s. A final section of this article looks at events in the past decade, particularly at developments since the emergence of ISIS in Syria and Iraq. In this context, the article explains why many young Muslims in Dagestan became themselves foreign fighters and travelled to Syria/Iraq to fight for and live in the Islamic State. It concludes that Salafi projects, although not indigenous to the region, prospered as a result of the interaction between local Salafis and foreign jihadist fighters and recruiters.

KEYWORDS

foreign fighters, Salafi-jihadism, Chechnya, Dagestan, ISIS, Islam, North Caucasus

¹ In accordance with Russian law, the editors deliberately excluded from references all the sources recognized as extremist and propagandizing terrorism, as well as the electronic addresses of the materials in the footnotes. ISIS is a terrorist organization prohibited in Russian Federation. Extremist ideologies are considered in the article only from the research viewpoint. Propaganda thereof is punishable by law in the Russian Federation.

В соответствии с российским законодательством, редакция журнала намеренно убрала из списка литературы источники, признанные экстремистскими и пропагандирующие терроризм, а также электронные адреса материалов в сносках. ИГИЛ – террористическая организация, запрещенная в Российской Федерации. В статье экстремистские идеологии рассмотрены исключительно с исследовательской точки зрения. Их пропаганда карается по закону в Российской Федерации.

This article intends to revisit the role of the foreign *jihadist* fighters who arrived in Chechnya in the mid-1990s/early 2000s as a result of the outbreak of the war by examining their impact on Islamic developments in Chechnya and Dagestan during the period 1990s–2010s. The role of foreign *jihadi* fighters and their effect on local Islamic communities is a topic that has received a great deal of attention among scholars. The academic work in this field has generally focused on four broad areas of research: firstly, the motivations driving foreign fighters to travel abroad and join an external insurgency;¹ secondly, the recruitment and mobilization processes that facilitate or allow these transfers to happen;² thirdly, the impact that the involvement of foreign fighters has had on local insurgencies and conflicts;³ and finally, the danger that these fighters may pose once they return at home.⁴ This last aspect has drawn particular interest in the West and Russia due to the high number of nationals from Western and Russian-speaking countries who have travelled to Syria and Iraq in 2013–2016 to join the ISIS and other *jihadists'* fights.⁵ This article looks at the third aspect, namely the impact of foreign fighters on the internal developments of the countries or regions where they move to. More specifically, the article aims critically to analyse the transformative effect of foreign *jihadists* on the dynamics of the Chechen war and its aftermath, with particular reference to local Islamic practices in both Chechnya and Dagestan.

Regarding the paper's research questions, we ask what impact foreign *jihadist* fighters and preachers have on the Islamist ideology of the Chechen (and later the North Caucasus) rebel movement? How have these foreign fighters affected Islamic political and societal developments in Chechnya and Dagestan? In other words, to what extent have the Salafi-*jihadist* ideologies of foreign fighters resonated with Muslim populations in Chechnya and Dagestan? By examining Islamist communities in the North Caucasus in the 1990s, the article firstly challenges the argument, which is predominant in the literature, that the foreign *jihadists* who arrived in Chechnya in the mid-1990s were primarily responsible for the transformation of the Chechen insurgency from a secular movement into a religious one. Instead, it argues that Islamist tendencies and Salafi circles were present in the North Caucasus before the outbreak of the First Chechen war. These local Salafi communities, or *jamaats*, became the core around which Salafi-*jihadist* projects grew and expanded in the aftermath of the first Chechen war. Secondly, the article contends that these local Salafi *jamaats*, in conjunction with foreign *jihadist* fighters, provided the mobilisation structures and the ideological framing for the radicalisation of the Chechen – and later entire North Caucasus – rebel movement.

Utilising an interpretive approach, the paper examines the Salafi-*jihadist* discourse of both foreign and local Salafis operating in Chechnya and Dagestan in the 1990s and 2000s. It shows how foreign Salafis influenced and helped to shape the ideological framing of local Salafi politicians and rebel *jihadist* groups. More specifically, the article illustrates how local Chechen and Dagestani Salafi fighters, politicians and preachers

1 Moore, Tumelty 2008; Moore 2015; Byman 2019.

2 Hegghammer 2010/2011; Hegghammer 2013; Neumann, Rogers 2007; Carter et. al. 2014; Sagramoso, Yarlykapov 2020.

3 Bakke 2014; Byman 2019.

4 Byman 2019; Ratelle 2016; Youngman, Moore 2017.

5 See Sagramoso, Yarlykapov 2020.

embraced many of the critical tenets of foreign Salafi-*jihadists* – especially the notions of *jihad* and the supremacy of *Shari'a law* – and adopted them to the local realities.

Furthermore, relying on an empirical approach, the article also shows how local and foreign Salafi-*jihadists* interacted on the ground to advance their mutual Salafi-*jihadist* project through the development of joint mobilisation structures. We explain why many of these Salafi-*jihadist* projects failed to gain broader societal support as they did not resonate with the local populations in Chechnya and Dagestan in the 1990s–2000s. A final section of this article looks at events in the past decade, particularly at developments since the emergence of ISIS in Syria and Iraq. By examining the Salafi-*jihadist* discourse of ISIS recruiters in Dagestan and of ISIS' widely circulated online magazine *Istok*, the article shows how the ISIS narrative – especially with regards to the concept of *jihad* and the importance of living in an Islamic state – resonated with sectors of the Dagestani population. Yet, it also argues that moderate forms of Salafism remain predominant among Salafi communities in Dagestan and the North Caucasus more generally, showing the limits of the relevance of the Salafi-*jihadism* embraced by foreign *jihadists*.

Methodology

The article is based on a vast array of relevant primary and secondary sources. It relies on the findings obtained by the authors during their two-decade-long research and field-work in the eastern North Caucasus, which focused on the dynamics, the nature and the drivers of Islamist-inspired violence in the region. The researchers have conducted various trips to the North Caucasus (primarily to Dagestan, but also to Chechnya and Ingushetiya) from 2004 to 2019, during which several informal, non-structured interviews were carried out with a variety of individuals, all of whom were relevant to the topic of research. Interviewees belonged to four broad categories – firstly, Muslim “community leaders,” such as imams and youth workers, and human rights advocates and lawyers concerned with political violence-related cases. The second category involved law enforcement and intelligence officials in charge of dealing with youth radicalisation and government officials responsible for addressing ethnic and confessional issues in the North Caucasus. A third group was composed of North Caucasus academic scholars, journalists, students and teachers, as well as local businessmen, all of whom had good knowledge of Islamic developments in their republics. The last group involved relatives of the individuals who travelled to Syria and Iraq in 2013–2015 and “former radicals” who were close to the Caucasus Emirate and/or ISIS.

Altogether, the authors gathered information from a totality of over 90 individuals in Dagestan, Chechnya, and Ingushetiya (in the latter case, interviews were conducted among Chechen internally displaced persons). All this first-hand material was complemented by analysing additional oral and written primary sources, such as videos, online platforms, official declarations, and original newspaper articles. Secondary sources, such as magazines, academic publications, reports produced by government institutions and independent researchers were also consulted. This multi-tiered approach allowed the authors to gain first-hand knowledge and insight into the drivers and dynamics of Islam in the eastern North Caucasus throughout the past two decades from various sources and varied perspectives.

Definitions and Literature Review

In his historical analysis of *foreign fighters*, D. Malet provides a general definition of the term, describing these actors as “non-citizens of conflict states who join insurgencies during civil conflicts.”¹ C. Moore and P. Tumelty, in their study on foreign fighters in Chechnya, add quite a bit more detail, defining these volunteers as “non-indigenous, non-territorialized combatants who, motivated by religion, kinship, and/or ideology rather than pecuniary reward, enter a conflict zone to participate in hostilities.”² In other words, foreign fighters participate in violent conflicts that are external to them for reasons other than financial rewards. T. Hegghammer, in his seminal analysis of Arab volunteers joining the Afghan/Soviet war, defines these foreign fighters as “unpaid combatants with no apparent link to the conflict [itself] other than religious affinity with the Muslim side,” thus emphasising the religious affinity of Muslim fighters to the Afghan insurgency movement.³ B. Rich’s and D. Conduit’s analysis, relying on T. Hegghammer’s work, highlights five relevant criteria that define a foreign fighter and are relevant to our analysis. Foreign fighters are individuals who join an insurgency external to them; they lack “citizenship of the conflict state or kinship links to its warring factions” and have no “affiliation to an official military organisation.”⁴ Furthermore, they are not paid for their actions – they are not mercenaries – although they may receive subsistence support. Finally, in this specific case, they adhere to the Sunni branch of Islam.⁵

These criteria and T. Hegghammer’s definition match quite well with the profile of the roughly 700 Middle Eastern *jihadist* insurgents. The latter travelled to the North Caucasus to fight in support of the Chechen war effort. It will, therefore, be utilised in this article.⁶ C. Moore argues that foreign fighters in Chechnya would be better described as “transnational activists” given the varied nature of their roles, ranging from trainers, weapons experts, military planners to propagandists, ideologues, and financial supporters besides fighters.⁷ This is a very helpful clarification. However, this paper will stick to the more common definition of *foreign fighters*, as most of those Islamist insurgents who came to Chechnya, even those primarily dedicated to preaching and recruitment contributed to the war effort in some way or other. In this respect, the notion of foreign fighters will be understood quite broadly, involving not just those dedicated primarily to fighting but also those in supporting roles and those developing the ideological frameworks that underpinned the fight.

The impact of *jihadist* “foreign fighters” or “transnational activists” on the Chechen wars has been the subject of significant research over the past decades. Scholars have tried to explain how foreign *jihadists* were coming primarily from the Middle East. The Gulf and Turkey have transformed the North Caucasus insurgency from a secular movement into a religious one. For example, B. Rich and D. Conduit have highlighted the impact of *jihadist* foreign fighters on the radicalisation of the indigenous Chechen

1 Malet 2015, 456.

2 Moore, Tumelty 2008, 412.

3 Hegghammer 2010/2011, 56–57.

4 Rich, Conduit 2015, 114.

5 Ibid.

6 Bakke 2014, 166.

7 Moore 2015, 2.

resistance movement, emphasising the “foreign” nature of Salafist Islamist currents. In their own words, “Although militant Sufi Islamist framing has long been a feature of anti-Russian conflict in the Caucasus, the JFF [*jihadi* foreign fighters] entrance into Chechnya introduced a foreign, Salafist framing that was distinct to historical traditions in the region.”¹ In other words, the arrival of the JFF primarily from Arab countries, is seen as significantly altering the nature of the fight from a predominantly secular ethnocultural struggle for independence from Russia to an Islamist *jihadi*-Salafi project of global reach.

The foreign *jihadi* in Chechnya, in B. Rich’s and D. Conduit’s view, “helped to normalise the JFF vision of Ichkeria as a front in a broader civilizational clash between Islam and the West within segments of indigenous Chechen society, orienting the project image of the cause away from its original secular, ethnocultural roots.”² A similar view was taken by L. Vidino, who asserted that foreign *mujahedeen* “played an essential role in shaping the conflict far beyond their numbers,” by “sacralizing” the Chechen separatist conflict and turning it into primarily a “militant Islamist uprising.”³ According to him, during the First Chechen war, the Islamist dimension “was almost non-existent.” With only a few exceptions, the main objective of Chechen rebel fighters was, in his view, to build a *secular* state, which would nevertheless preserve Chechnya’s social structures and Islamic identities.⁴ Wahhabism, according to Vidino, was a foreign-imported ideology that took root in the North Caucasus during the inter-war period.

This same argument has been brought forward by K. Bakke, who has emphasised the secular nature of the Chechen resistance movement under D. Dudayev by highlighting his resistance to introducing Sharia law and Sharia Courts in Chechnya.⁵ “The Salafi version of Islam, locally known as Wahhabism, she notes, [was] brought to Chechnya with the transnational insurgents in the mid-1990s.”⁶ She further argues that the entry of Islamist framing into the Chechen struggle against Russia rather than reinforcing the movement “led to a clear split between a nationalist and Islamist branch of the insurgent movement,” weakening it further.⁷ R.W. Schaefer similarly argues that neither Salafism nor Wahhabism played any part in Chechnya’s decision to declare independence from Russia in 1991. In his view, radical Islam is a consequence and not a cause of the war.⁸ It is “the war itself that brought in a more radical form of Islam in Chechnya,” primarily spearheaded by foreign fighters such as Ibn al-Khattab, who arrived in the region in 1995.

This view is also shared by C. Moore and P. Tumelty, who, in their analysis of foreign fighters in Chechnya, have argued that “conservative interpretations of Islam had little credence among the nationalist-separatist Chechen leadership.”⁹ Previous authors have also highlighted the critical relevance of *jihadi* fighters in transforming the Chechen

1 Rich, Conduit 2015, 116.

2 Ibid.

3 Vidino 2006, 1.

4 Ibid., 2.

5 Bakke 2014, 168.

6 Ibid., 171.

7 Ibid., 177–178.

8 Schaefer 2011, 163.

9 Moore, Tumelty 2008, 418.

insurgency into an Islamist-inspired fight while also impacting political developments in Chechnya during and after the end of the first war.¹ A similar argumentation has been brought forward by J. Wilhelmsen, who, in turn, has highlighted the instrumental role played by Islam during the First Chechen war. In her own words, "Dudayev discovered that adopting Islamic slogans was a useful mobilising tool."² According to J. Wilhelmsen, the war itself produced the further radicalisation of the Chechen resistance movement.

The Relevance of Local Islamist Trends

While there is little doubt that the influx of foreign *jihadist* fighters from the Middle East and the Gulf contributed quite significantly to the ideological radicalisation of the Chechen rebel movement, it is important to highlight that Islamist – including Salafi – projects were not entirely new or alien to Chechnya and Dagestan when the First Chechen war broke out in 1994. In Dagestan, a group of young imams – A. Akhmad-qadi Akhtaev and the brothers Bagauddin and Abbas Kebedov – had set up the first underground Salafi communities with the purpose of learning the tenets of Islam in its purest forms already in the late 1970s.³ When the USSR collapsed and Islam once again began to flourish in the North Caucasus, A. Akhmad-qadi Akhtaev led the more moderate Salafi current in Dagestan while also heading the local branch of the Islamic Revival Party (IRP). A. Akhtaev and his followers were eager to ensure the return to the pure forms of Islam and rid local Islamic practices of *bid'a* or sinful innovations.⁴ They were particularly critical of Sufi practices, which had a strong tradition and were widespread in Dagestan, such as the veneration of saints and sheikhs. They saw these traditions as a deviation from monotheism or *tawhid*.⁵

However, A. Akhtaev and his supporters emphasised their adherence to peaceful means of Islamic proselytism and recognised the authority of secular organs of power in the republic.⁶ A. Akhtaev vocally called against the conduct of violent *jihad* in Dagestan and strongly opposed the application of *takfir* (non-believer) to non-practising Muslims and non-Muslims in Dagestan. Instead, he advocated the gradual re-Islamisation of Dagestani society as a precondition for the subsequent re-Islamisation of the state.⁷ A small group of Dagestani Salafis, however, became attracted to more radical views. Figures such as Bagauddin Kebedov considered the secular governments of the region to be *kafir* (godless) and therefore illegitimate, and thus called for the immediate introduction of *Shari'a* law in Dagestan. B. Kebedov and his followers also favoured the idea of spreading Salafism to the rest of the region and uniting the Caucasus under Islamic rule. This was seen as an intermediate stage on the path towards the future complete unity of all Muslims in the *ummah*.⁸ They took as their models of statehood the regimes of Sudan and Afghanistan. B. Kebedov and his Salafi *jamaat* were also

1 Ibid., 418; Moore 2015, 11.

2 Wilhelmsen 2005, 36.

3 Moore, Tumelty 2008, 418.

4 Макаров 2000, 25.

5 Бобровников, Ярлыкапов 1999, 20.

6 Ibid., 21.

7 Мантаев 2002, 74.

8 Макаров 2000, 26.

very critical of the Sufi practices which flourished in Dagestan.¹ They thus conducted an active struggle against Sufi sheikhs in Dagestan, which was generally characterised by a verbal propaganda war. However, at times the confrontation with Sufi *murids* also took a violent form.²

In Chechnya, the first underground Salafi communities emerged during the late 1980s – early 1990s. They involved small groups of individuals who met in secret to discuss ways to replace traditional Chechen Sufi practices with purified forms of Islam that imitated the life of the faithful during the time of Prophet Mohammed.³ These early Salafists, such as Islam Khalimov, A. Akhmad Matayev and A. Adam Deniyev, worked towards establishing an Islamic underground political organisation, which would eventually join other similar Islamic groups in the Soviet Union. In the early 1990s, as the Soviet Union collapsed, they set up a branch of the IRP based on a quasi-Salafite ideology. A. Matayev, in particular, was very critical of the many Sufi traditions which were being practised in Chechnya, such as the veneration of Sufi sheikhs and the visiting their places of worship.⁴ However, the influence of the IRP and these Salafi preachers remained rather limited at the time, and their impact was undoubtedly less significant than that of fellow Salafis in neighbouring Dagestan.⁵ Salafis in Chechnya lacked well-trained, charismatic leaders. In 1992–1993, they had to compete with the traditional Islamic structures, the *Qadiriya* and *Naqshbandiyya* Sufi *tariqats*, becoming increasingly influential in D. Dudayev's Chechnya.

The first Salafi scholars in Dagestan and Chechnya were ideologically and educationally linked to the Sufi *Naqshbandiyya* and *Qadiriya tariqats*, who had received their education. However, they increasingly adopted a more rigid Salafi stance under the influence of famous Islamic Salafi scholars, such as Mawlana Maududi and Hassan al-Turabi, whose writings – translated into Russian – were published in the region in the 1990s.⁶ When the Soviet Union collapsed, local Salafis also became enriched with the teachings of foreign missionaries who came to the North Caucasus from various Middle Eastern Muslim countries.⁷ Moreover, regular contacts with Islamic scholars and education in Arab countries strongly contributed to the improvement of their knowledge of Islam and, in some cases, to their radicalization.⁸ In other words, local Salafi communities in the North Caucasus were heavily influenced by foreign Salafi ideas, which penetrated the region in the early 1990s through foreign preachers and Salafist literature.

Although marginal, these early Salafi *jamaats* nevertheless provided the ideological framing and mobilizational structures for the radicalisation of the Chechen – and eventually the entire North Caucasus – rebel movement after the outbreak of the First Chechen war. Furthermore, while the Chechen independence movement of the early to mid-1990s was primarily secular in nature, the Islamic religion remained strongly

1 Трусливый ваххабит Багаутдин Кебедов // Youtube. 1 февраля 2019.

2 Ibid.; Makarov, Mukhametshin 2003, 156.

3 Mairbek Vatchagaev, "Strategy and Perspectives on Dokka Umarov's Rapprochement with the Radicals," North Caucasus Weekly, May 2007.

4 Акаев, В.Х. Религиозно-просветительская роль газеты «Зори Ислама» // Южнороссийское обозрение. 2001.

5 Conversations of the author with Chechen journalists, Moscow 2006.

6 Information obtained through interviews in Dagestan, 2005–2007.

7 Interview with Asiyatillov Surakat Khvalovich, former Chairman of the Dagestani Parliamentary Committee on Religious and Inter-ethnic Affairs, 1999.

8 Мантаев 2002.

intertwined with national, ethnic and cultural identities in Chechnya. This allowed Islam to take pre-eminence in Chechen political and societal life once war broke out. This occurred not only because, as J. Wilhelmsen correctly pointed out, “when in trouble, people turn to God,”¹ but also because the Islamic religion became a critical *us-versus-them* group identifier during the war. The violent conflict soon created a distinction between Russians and Chechens along religious lines, between “believers” and “non-believers”, or *kafir*. As rightly expressed by A. Malashenko, “In their confrontation with Russia, [Chechens] asserted themselves not as an ethnos, but as a distinct ethnic-confessional community.”² The war itself was described as *jihad* or “holy war,” a notion that resonated strongly among local Chechens. The concept of *jihad* had figured prominently in the Chechen historical memory – primarily in the form of *ghazawat* or “holy war” against the Tsarist forces during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.³ However, during the mid-1990s, the *jihad* against Russia was interpreted primarily within the context of Chechen national liberation from Moscow’s rule. It was only later, in the mid-2000s, that the Caucasus insurgency was constructed as global *jihad* carried out against Russians, “Jews and Crusaders” for the sake of creating an Islamic state in the Caucasus.

It must also be noted that even before the war broke out, Islam was already permeating a significant aspect of Chechen political and social life. Not only did Chechen society experience a revival of Islam, but local politics also started witnessing a process of Islamisation under the leadership of D. Dudayev as the latter relied increasingly on religious structures – the *Qadiriya* Sufi brotherhood or *tariqat*, the lower clergy and the revived Council of Elders (*Mekhhk-Kkhel*) – to strengthen his rule in the face of domestic opposition in 1993 and 1994.⁴ All of these institutions called, to varying degrees, for the introduction of Islamic rule and Islamic law in Chechnya. More significantly, in late 1992 and early 1993, several official constitutional projects were devised, envisioning the adoption of Islam as Chechnya’s state religion and the introduction of Islamic law. Some had clear Salafi undertones, such as the project introduced in October 1992 by U. Imayev, Chairman of the Chechen Parliamentary Committee on Constitutional Reform, which stipulated for the introduction of *Shari’a* punishment for criminal offences.⁵

There were also calls for the introduction of Islamic law from D. Dudayev’s critics within the Spiritual Board of Muslims of Chechnya (SBMC), headed by M. Garkayev, a member of the *Naqshbandiyya tariqat*. In May 1993, as disappointment with D. Dudayev’s rule grew, the *Council of Ulema of the SBMC* issued a declaration calling for the respect of Islamic law. The SBMC, however, was not promoting the establishment of a Salafist legal regime. Instead, it favoured a form of Islam based on the *Shafii* school of Islamic jurisprudence. Yet, the SBMC still made it clear that Islamic law (*Shari’a*) had to be implemented. It called on D. Dudayev to change all unconstitutional rulings, stating “the government must build its work taking strict account of Islamic principles, regarding what is allowed (*halal*) and what is forbidden (*haram*), and only on this basis

1 Wilhelmsen 2005, 38.

2 Малашенко 1998, 168.

3 Malashenko 2002, 297.

4 Малашенко 1998, 168; Добаев et al. 2002, 86; Rotar 2002, 104.

5 Добаев et al. 2002, 86.

can it demand obedience.”¹ This creeping Islamisation of Chechnya provided the basis for radical Islamist projects to thrive and take ground politically once the war broke out in 1994–1995.

Finally, it must be emphasised that the foreign fighters who went to Chechnya with the outbreak of the first war were not the first Salafis to arrive in the North Caucasus. As noted above, they were preceded by a series of Salafi preachers and charitable organisations which penetrated Chechnya and Dagestan in the early 1990s, as relaxations on the practice of the Islamic religion were introduced and contacts were established with the broader Islamic world. Many of these organisations, such as the Islamic Benevolence Foundation, the Islamic Salvation Organisations and the Al Haramain fund, had clear Wahhabi leanings and concentrated their support on the most radical Islamist communities in the North Caucasus – thus contributing to the spread of Salafi ideas in the region.² As was noted by

S. Asiyatilov, former Chairman of the Dagestani Parliamentary Committee on Religious and Inter-ethnic Affairs, “When the Soviet Union collapsed, [Wahhabis – authors] came running here [...] they published many books from Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, their main ideologue, as well as from [the Pakistani Salafi ideologue – authors] Maududi and several other Wahhabi authors [...] Thousands are now reading these books. And there are also many [Wahhabi – authors] audio and videotapes [distributed in the region – authors].”³

In other words, Salafism was not entirely new to the region when foreign fighters and preachers arrived from the Middle East with the outbreak of the war.

These Middle Eastern preachers found a fertile terrain. Salafism’s spiritual purism and its social egalitarianism proved particularly appealing to young Muslims frustrated with the local socio-economic conditions prevalent in the region. Salafists’ condemnation of traditional forms of social organization and local customs struck a chord with those individuals in search of a remedy for the socio-economic distress faced by the societies they lived in.⁴ Yet, the Middle Eastern preachers who arrived in Chechnya and Dagestan undoubtedly promoted a more austere and fundamentalist form of Islam (or Wahhabism) which did not have strong roots in the North Caucasus not resonate strongly with local Islamic traditions and customs. This strict form of Salafism, which had its origins in Saudi Arabia, was seen by many North Caucasus Muslims as alien to their Islamic faith. Salafism, therefore, failed to gain traction among the vast majority of Chechens and Dagestanis, who generally practised Sufi forms of Islam. Nevertheless, foreign fighters and preachers *did* help to generate a significant transformation of the local Chechen insurgency from a primarily ethnonational or ethno-confessional project into an Islamic-Salafist one. This, in turn, greatly impacted local Islamic dynamics in the North Caucasus in the following decades.

1 Малашенко 1998, 168.

2 Макаров 2000, 48.

3 Interview by one of the authors. Dagestan, August 1999.

4 Макаров 2000, 48.

The Chechen War and the Islamisation of Chechnya

With the outbreak of the First Chechen war in the winter of 1994–1995, Salafi religious figures from the Arab world arrived in Chechnya to support the war effort and spread the Islamic faith.¹ They set up their Salafi communities and established close ties with local Salafi leaders, contributing to the Salafisation of the Chechen resistance movement. Of particular relevance was the figure of Sheikh Ali Fathi al-Shishani, a Jordanian of Chechen descent, who established the first Salafi *jamaats* in the republic and became very popular among the Chechen youth.² He possessed excellent theological knowledge of Islam and proved inspirational to many young Chechens, to whom he spoke in their native Chechen language. He talked about the need to live according to *Shari'a* law and emphasised the moral aspects of Islamic life, especially as far as marriage, the role of women and dress codes were concerned.³ However, he did not confront Sufi sheikhs and Sufi rituals as practised in Chechnya. Instead, he called for the gradual introduction of Islamic principles through education and proselytizing activities. However, he orchestrated the arrival of other *Afghan Arab* fighters to Chechnya, including the Emir ibn al-Khattab and several of his followers.⁴

Emir Khattab (or Samer ben Saleh ben Abdallah al-Sweleim) came from northern Saudi Arabia, and like many of his fellow countrymen had followed the calls of the Jordanian preacher A. Azzam to fight *jihad* during the Afghan/Soviet war. Abdullah Azzam became the leading ideologue of *jihad* for the *Afghan Arabs* – those Middle Eastern and North African foreign fighters who had gone to Afghanistan during the 1980s.⁵ A. Azzam argued that it was Muslims' individual duty (*fard 'ayn*) to fight defensive *jihad* when the enemy had attacked the Islamic heartland. In his view, *jihad* was compulsory, "until the liberation of the last piece of land which was in the hands of Muslims but has been occupied by Disbelievers."⁶ *Jihad* in A. Azzam's view was a sacrament on the level of the five pillars of Islam. Any Muslim not participating in *jihad* was, in his view, in a state of sin.⁷ Khattab adhered to the same extreme interpretation of Islamic *jihad*. In an interview with A. Azzam publications in September 1999, he stated that "all Muslims must fight *Jihad* for the sake of Allah. Allah mentioned several times in the Qu'ran the need to fight with your wealth and yourself in His [name]," and added "Islam has been spread all over the world with *Dawa* and *Jihad*. *Dawa* and *jihad* [thus] go hand in hand."⁸ He thus embraced the concept of *offensive jihad* to promote the spread of Islam to the *Dar al-Harb* or domain of war. To fulfil these duties, Khattab set up various training camps in the mountainous areas of Chechnya, where a very fundamentalist form of Salafi Islam was taught, and military training was provided to Islamist fighters from all over the North Caucasus. During the late 1990s,

1 Williams 2003; Moore, Tumelty 2008.

2 Personal interview with Chechen refugees. London, 2007.

3 See for example his sermon on the hijab: Шайх Фатхы проповедь о хъйжабе // Youtube. 2 декабря 2013.

4 al-Shishani 2006, 7.

5 Williams 2003.

6 A. Azzam, "Join the Caravan: Part 3: Clarifications About the Issue of Jihad Today," Religioscope, December 9, 1988.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibn al-Khattab, "World Exclusive Interview with Ibn al-Khattab," Azzam Publications.

many Salafis and fighters from Dagestan, Ingushetiya, Kabardino-Balkariya, and Karachaevo-Cherkessiya trained in these camps before setting up their local Salafi *jamaats*.

Impact of Foreign Jihadists on Chechen and Dagestani Salafis

Khattab's ideas found strong support among influential Chechen Salafis in the insurgency movement, such as M. Udugov, and popular Chechen warlords, such as Sh. Basayev. M. Udugov was an ardent Salafist who considered Sudan under H. Hassan al-Turabi and Afghanistan under the Taliban¹ as the models to be emulated when establishing an Islamic state in Chechnya. M. Udugov insisted on the supremacy of the Islamic *Shari'a* as the only source of law and legitimacy, rejecting all other secular forms of government: "All modern forms of government, from elected democracies to totalitarian regimes are de facto tyrannies, whether communist, democratic, monarchical, totalitarian, authoritarian or other."² In August 1997, he founded the movement *Islamskaya Natsiya* intending to unite Chechnya and Dagestan under a single Islamic state.³ To materialise such an idea, the "Congress of Peoples of Ichkeriya and Dagestan" was set up in April 1998, under the leadership of S. Basayev, aiming to join both nations under Islamic rule. The Congress was soon transformed into a military-political organisation whose military wing – the Islamic Peace-making Battalion – was intended to unify Chechnya and Dagestan under Islamic rule.⁴ This battalion, headed by S. Basayev and Khattab, carried out the invasion of the Botlikh region of Dagestan in the summer of 1999. As noted by S. Basayev himself: "What is going on in Dagestan is a mighty *jihad*, a holy war to expel the infidels from an Islamic land, which has been in the Islamic fold for thirteen centuries [...] We are fighting for the proclamation of an Islamic republic and the establishment of a greater Chechen empire in Chechnya, Dagestan and Ingushetia."⁵ M. Udugov took an even more radical stance, by arguing in favour of turning the future Chechen Islamic state into a stronghold from where to spread global *jihad* worldwide.⁶ In his view, Dagestanis and Chechens were not struggling against Russia but were actually fighting against global Zionism and, therefore, the final aim was "the liberation of Jerusalem."⁷

Radical Dagestani Salafis, such as B. Kebedov, who fled with his entourage to Chechnya in 1997, also believed that the highest form of *jihad* entailed a campaign to spread Islam worldwide, including through violent means. B. Kebedov and his followers viewed *jihad* as a defensive armed struggle to overcome those obstacles that Islam's enemies had placed in the path of its peaceful proliferation.⁸ *Jihad*, according to B. Kebedov, was "the source of Muslim strength and glory." In his view, "As long as Muslims followed the path of *jihad*, they would never be defeated."⁹ In 1999, B. Kebedov

1 Taliban is a terrorist organization prohibited in the Russian Federation.

2 Удугов, М., Леонтьев, М. Большевикизм: Кремлевский или Исламский? // Caucasus Times. 21 апреля 2006.

3 Rotar 2002, 109.

4 Макаров 2000, 49.

5 al-Aman 1999.

6 Rotar 2002, 110.

7 Ibid., 110.

8 Ярлыкапов 2003, 589.

9 al-Dagestani 2006, 510–511.

appealed to the “Islamic patriots of the Caucasus” to “partake in *jihad*” and help “liberate Dagestan and the Caucasus from Russian colonial joke.”¹ B. Kebedov considered the secular governments of the region to be godless and therefore illegitimate and thus called for the immediate introduction of *Shari’a* law in Dagestan. B. Kebedov told his followers that “Any law, which is not based on the Quran and the hadiths is to be considered *taghut* (idolatry), [...] any government which does not rule according to Allah’s law is to be considered *taghut*, and must therefore be shunned. Instead, Allah and his laws must be embraced.”²

Salafi projects also enjoyed the support of a very active Dagestani Salafis group based in the central Dagestani district of Buinaksk. Under the spiritual and military leadership of D. Radjbaddinov, in the spring of 1998, they took control of four mountainous villages in the Kadar zone – Karamakhi, Chabanmakhi, Durangi and Kadar – after a series of confrontations with the local militia. In August 1998, they went as far as proclaiming these areas an “Independent Islamic territory,” and started introducing *Shari’a* law with the tacit consent of the Russian Federal authorities. These Dagestani regions established closed contacts with many Arab *jihadist* fighters who had arrived in Chechnya during the first war. Khattab, for example, spent quite some time in this “Wahhabi enclave” in 1996, where he wedded a local Karamakhi woman. More importantly, he helped to arm and train militarily many of the local Salafis in this area.³ Arab Salafi preacher Sheikh A.O. al-Sayf also spent time in the Kadar zone, married a girl from Karamakhi, and apparently, also became instrumental in setting up this military Salafi *jamaat*.⁴ Both Khattab and A.O. al-Sayf participated in the 1997 raid, together with Dagestani Salafis from the Kadar Islamist enclave, in the attack on a Russian military base in Buinaksk. In other words, foreign *jihadists* interacted closely with local Salafis, not only in Chechnya but also in Dagestan, to further the realisation of their Salafi projects. In these two republics, they found local Salafi communities or *jamaats* ready to embrace their more extreme Islamist views, and if necessary, fight next to each other when considered necessary – as occurred in 1997 and again in the summer of 1999.

Salafists also favoured the Chechen leadership that emerged after the Russian 1996 defeat, particularly with Z. Yandarbiyev, who was appointed acting President after D. Dudayev’s death in 1996. The war transformed Z. Yandarbiyev into an ardent Salafist who supported the introduction of *Shari’a* rule in Chechnya. “Only Sharia [*law* – authors] could help Chechens address the social, economic and political difficulties that they faced in 1996 and 1997,” he noted when interviewed in 2004.⁵ When he took office, he replaced the existing secular Constitution with an Islamic one, clearly stating that the *Quran* and the *Shari’a* were the principal sources of legislation in Chechnya.⁶ He also introduced an Islamic criminal code based on the Sudanese 1983 model, which

1 Emil Souleimanov, “Chechnya, Wahhabism and the Invasion of Dagestan,” *The Middle East Review of International Affairs*, December 2005, accessed December 1, 2021, <https://web.archive.org/web/20120420105113/http://meria.idc.ac.il/journal/2005/issue4/jv9no4a4.html>.

2 Мухаммад, Б. Признаки смерти // ImamTV.com. 22 августа 1997 г.

3 Igor Rotar, “Islamic Radicals in Dagestan,” *Prism*, March 20, 1998, accessed December 1, 2021, <https://jamestown.org/program/islamic-radicals-in-dagestan/>; Murphy 2004, 45.

4 Murphy 2004, 44–45.

5 “Jihad in Chechnya, Part 1,” BBC, accessed December 1, 2021, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gdjKUN08tvE&feature=related>.

6 Bobrovnikov 2000.

followed the *Maliki* doctrine of Islam.¹ Secular courts were disbanded, and a *Shari'a* judicial system was slowly introduced. Islamic law and Arabic were made compulsory at schools, although a severe shortage of teachers meant that only a few schools could offer such teachings.² All sale of alcohol was forbidden, and criminals began to be tried according to *Shari'a* law, although there were few death sentences or corporal punishments.³

In his effort to Islamise Chechnya, Z. Yandarbiyev relied on the support of both foreign and local Salafis. When he took office, he invited Dagestani Salafi preacher B. Kebedov to Chechnya to help him establish Sharia law in the new republic. He also placed many Salafis in key government positions, especially in the courts, security units, and military.⁴ For example, the leading Chechen Salafi Islam Khalimov became Minister of Shariah state security. At the same time, the Saudi-born Salafi preacher Sheikh A.O. al-Sayf was appointed head of the religious *Shari'a* courts, under the title of Chairman of the Committee of Judges and Fatwas. In his new position, al-Sayf implemented *Shari'a* law according to the rigorous Saudi Arabian legal model and relied in his rulings on the legal advice of renowned Saudi Salafi religious scholars, such as Sheikh M.S. al-Uthaymeen.⁵

A.O. al-Sayf and his Saudi Salafi companion Abu Zaid al-Kuwaiti (also known as Abu Omar al-Kuwaiti, or Ahmed Nasser al-Azmi) considered democracy a form of heresy. Instead, they supported the Salafi-*jihadist* way, which was said to be perceived as "a thorn in the side of [our] enemies, hypocrites and apostates."⁶ They, therefore, called for the immediate implementation of *Shari'a* law and the establishment of an Islamic Constitution in Chechnya along the lines of the Saudi Arabian model.⁷ In their attempts to spread their Salafi ideology in the Caucasus, these foreign Salafi preachers obtained the support of several foreign Islamic charities, whose activities significantly expanded with the arrival of Khattab and his followers in Chechnya. Organisations like Al-Haramain, the World Assembly of Muslim Youth, and the Islamic Benevolent Foundation became especially active during the second half of the 1990s. They intensified their efforts to spread the Islamic Salafi faith among Muslims in Chechnya. They proved to be particularly effective in their proselytizing activities among young, disenfranchised Chechens because of the funds they were able to offer.⁸

The Outbreak of the Second Chechen War and 9/11

With the Second Chechen war outbreak in the autumn of 1999, Salafi projects in the eastern North Caucasus were dealt a severe blow. Russia bombed the "Wahhabi" enclaves in Dagestan, crushed the advances of S. Basayev and Khattab into Dagestan's Botlikh district, and used massive force to bring Chechnya back into Russia's fore. Moreover, in all republics of the North Caucasus, a ban on the practice of "Wahhabism"

1 Bobrovnikov 2000.

2 Rotar 2002, 105.

3 Bobrovnikov 2000.

4 Murphy 2004, 41.

5 al-Shishani 2006, 9.

6 Murad B. al-Shishani, "Is the Salafi-jihadist Way still an Obstacle to Russia in Chechnya," *The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, 18 May 2005.

7 al-Shishani 2006, 9.

8 *Ibid.*, 9.

was introduced, followed by a campaign of severe repressions against suspected fighters and Salafi followers. As a result, most members of Salafi *jamaats* in the North Caucasus were pushed underground, and many moderate Salafis became increasingly radicalised.¹

Within this context, the contingent of foreign Middle Eastern *ihadists* in Chechnya adopted a more radical stance. It tried increasingly to align itself with the goals and tactics of global *ihadist* movements. Abu Walid al-Ghamidi, Emir Khattab's successor as military leader of the foreign *ihadists* in Chechnya, became increasingly concerned with events in the broader Islamic world, particularly with the United States' war in Iraq.² In June 2003, he sent a message through the Qoqaz website, in which he encouraged Iraqis to participate in suicide operations. "According to [his] experiences in Caucasus," he wrote, "such operations will affect American and British troops."³ In turn, Abu Walid's successor, Abu Hafs al-Urdani, fully aligned his rhetoric with that of al-Qaeda⁴ and al-Zarqawi when he became leader of the Arab *ihadist* in Chechnya in 2004 even vowed to attack the United States.⁵

Many of the Arab Salafi preachers who had arrived in Chechnya during the first war, such as al-Kuwaiti, also started calling for the spread of violent *ihad* as a means of implementing their Islamist Salafi project. In al-Kuwaiti's own words, "if monotheism is not achieved through *Jihad*, it [simply] becomes a tradition and not a religion [...]. the heart of the Salafi-*Jihadi* project is establishing an Islamic state using violent means."⁶ Following in the footsteps of Abu Walid, al-Kuwaiti and al-Sayf also started calling for *ihad* not just against Russia in the North Caucasus but against the West as well, and in particular, against Americans in Iraq.⁷ Al-Sayf and al-Kuwaiti described the US war in Iraq as a Western "Crusade" and saw Iraq as the "graveyard" of American troops.⁸

These developments undoubtedly impacted the Caucasus Emirate insurgency, as indicated by its embrace, in the late 2000s, of global *ihadist* discourse. "We are an inseparable part of the Islamic Ummah," the Caucasus Emirate leader D. Umarov noted in 2007, "Today our brothers are fighting in Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia and Palestine... Those who attack Muslims are our common enemies; our enemy is not only Russia but all those who conduct war against Islam and against Muslims."⁹ Furthermore, several of the Caucasus Emirate *ihadists*' websites, such as *Kavkazcenter*, *VDagestan* or *Islamdin*, began making constant references to other *ihads* taking place in the Muslim world – in Afghanistan, Iraq and Palestine – and regularly reported the views of famous Islamic *ihadist* clerics, such as Sheikh Anwar Al-Awlaki and Abu Muhammad Asem al-Maqdisi.¹⁰ Moreover, renowned Middle Eastern Islamic preachers were consulted for advice and

1 Sagramoso 2007.

2 Moore, Tumelty 2008, 422.

3 Nokhcho, Howard 2005.

4 al-Qaeda is a terrorist organization prohibited in the Russian Federation.

5 Moore, Tumelty 2008, 422; Bill Roggio, "Chechen al Qaeda Emir Abu Hafs Killed," Long War Journal, accessed December 1, 2021, https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2006/11/chechen_alqaeda_emir.php.

6 al-Shishani 2006, 5.

7 Murad B. al-Shishani, "Is the Salafi-Jihadist Way still an Obstacle to Russia in Chechnya," The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst, 18 May 2005.

8 Ibid.

9 Умаров, Д. Официальный релиз заявления Амира Докку Умарова о провозглашении Кавказского Эмирата // Кавказ Центр. 21 ноября 2007.

10 Sagramoso 2012, 564.

guidance on Islam and the Caucasian Emirate, further strengthening ties between North Caucasus *jihadists* and global Salafi-*jihadist* networks. More significantly, North Caucasian *jihadists* also started adopting more explicit anti-Western and anti-Jewish discourses, as shown in several of their speeches and publications.¹ Furthermore, *jihadist* fighters began once again in 2010 to conduct indiscriminate terrorist acts against civilians, causing a high number of casualties and replicating a practice usually conducted by *jihadists* closely associated with al-Qaeda – thus aligning themselves with the tactics and not just with the narrative of global *jihadist* movements.

With the Second Chechen war outbreak, foreign *jihadists* also began exerting intense pressure on the Chechen rebel leader A. Maskhadov, demanding him to “rule” according to strict Islamic principles. Under pressure from these foreign fighters and local warlords such as S. Basayev, Maskhadov was forced to approve the introduction of changes in the Chechen Constitution, which brought the latter closer to Islamic norms.² The new Constitution of the now “virtual” Chechen Republic of Ichkeriya stated that “the source of all decisions [taken by the authorities in Chechnya] is the Quran and the Sunnah.”³ Supreme authority of the state was bestowed onto the Majlis al-Shura, a Supreme Council composed of those Amirs and Ulema who had taken an active part in the *jihad*.

While Chechen President A. Maskhadov embraced political Islam only reluctantly, and under intense pressure from foreign *jihadist* fighters, his successors adopted a much more radical stance. With Sheikh Abdul-Khalim Sadulayev as “President” of Chechnya after A. Maskhadov’s death in 2005, the rebel movement acquired an increasingly religious dimension. A. Sadulayev, who had previously been the Chairman of the Supreme *Shari’a* Court, brought the “virtual” Chechen Constitution further in line with Islamic law. In a statement issued on 11 February 2006, he reiterated the principle that the Chechen Republic of Ichkeriya was a sovereign, independent, Islamic legal state (*Islamskoe pravovoe gosudarstvo*), created on the basis of the self-determination of the Chechen people. He also reaffirmed the principle that the *Qur’an* and the *Sunnah* had to be the source of all decisions taken by the authorities.⁴ He turned the Majlis Shura of the Republic of Chechnya into the Supreme organ of state power and specified that it be elected according to Islamic law. The institution of the president was abolished and replaced with that of Emir of the Chechen-Republic of Ichkeriya’s Majlis Shura.⁵ A. Sadulayev, however, was not a radical Wahhabi. He belonged to the *Shafii* juridical school of Islam and did not espouse any strict Salafi doctrines. No reference was ever made in his speeches to the concepts of *tawhid* or *takfir*. In his view, the *jihad* taking place in Chechnya was primarily “defensive.”

The major transformation of the Chechen rebel movement into a North Caucasus Salafi-*jihadist* force occurred under the leadership of D. Umarov, who in November 2007, officially declared the creation of a “Caucasian Emirate,” in replacement of the existing

1 See the work by the Caucasian Emirate Qadi, Ali Abu Muhammad: Кадий ИК Абу Мухаммад: Оправдание по невежеству и крайности, в которые попали две группы // KavkazCenter. 19 сентября 2011. In the text, there are several negative references to Jews and Christians as *kafirs*.

2 Амир Сейфуллах. Джихад против вероотступников // KavkazCenter. 10 марта 2007.

3 Масхадов, А. «Положение о ГКО – Маджлисуль-Шура разработано в полном соответствии с Конституцией ЧРИ и законом “О военном положении”» // Чеченпресс. 22 октября 2002 г.

4 Шейх Абдул-Халим. Заявление Президента ЧРИ Шейха Абдул-Халима // KavkazCenter. 13 февраля 2006.

5 Ibid.

secular structures of power which were still officially ruling the resistance movement.¹ The declaration of the Emirate was intended to ensure the full embracement of Islamic *Shari'a* law, along Salafi lines, by the entire North Caucasian rebel movement, which expanded from Dagestan to Karachayevo-Cherkessiya. The Caucasian Emirate was to be ruled by a Supreme Amir (D. Umarov), who was the only source of power in this virtual "state."² Umarov abolished all remnants of the secular institutions of the "virtual" Chechen Republic of Ichkeriya and replaced them with Islamic structures.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, D. Umarov had been a moderate, secular figure (a follower of the Sufi Qadiriyya *tariqat*) who had placed greater emphasis on the liberation of the Chechen people from Russian rule rather than on *jihād* in the North Caucasus. Yet, his views started to change in 2006, as he came under the influence of foreign Arab *jihadists* and North Caucasian Salafis, such as the renowned preacher from Kabardino-Balkariya, A. Astemirov. The latter had been an ardent supporter of peaceful Salafi Islam during the 1990s. Still, in the mid-2000s, he became increasingly supportive of *jihadist* Islam in response to the harsh repressions carried out by the local authorities against suspected terrorists and members of his *jamaat*.³ He, together with Arab Salafis, who pressured D. Umarov into declaring the Caucasus Emirate, clearly showed the deep interaction between local Salafis and foreign *jihadist* fighters⁴ once again.

The rise of ISIS

In the early 2010s, the Russian government carried out a brutal counter-insurgency campaign against *jihadist* fighters in the North Caucasus – especially in 2013–2014, given the upcoming Sochi Winter Olympics. These operations saw the elimination of many of the Caucasus Emirate leaders and the drastic repression of unofficial Salafist practices in both Chechnya and Dagestan. The influence of Middle Eastern *jihadists* also decreased as many foreign *jihadist* leaders were assassinated by Russian special forces (Khattab in 2002) or killed in military operations (Abu al-Walid al-Ghamidi in 2004, Abu Zaid al-Kuwaiti and Abu Omar al-Sayf in 2005, Abu Hafs al-Urdani in 2006). Foreign *jihadists* also lost many of their traditional funding sources, further reducing their ability to influence local developments.⁵ In view of these developments, Salafis in the North Caucasus became increasingly attracted to the Islamist projects that began to emerge in the Middle East, in particular within the context of the Syrian civil war. The outbreak of war in Syria and the plight of Sunni Muslims at the hands of B. Assad's military machine touched a sensitive chord among Muslims in the Russian North Caucasus, many of whom felt the need to travel to the region and fight *jihad* in support of their co-religionaries. More importantly, the territorial successes of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2014–2015, together with the possibility of living in a state ruled by *Shari'a* law, proved to be particularly appealing to pious North Caucasus Muslims. In the Islamic State, young Muslims saw a Sunni-controlled

1 Умаров, Д. Официальный релиз заявления Амира Докку Умарова о провозглашении Кавказского Эмирата // Кавказ Центр. 21 ноября 2007.

2 Ibid.

3 Sagramoso, Yemelianova 2009, 125–130.

4 Sagramoso 2012, 591.

5 al-Shishani 2006, 13–14.

territory organised around a rigorous interpretation of Islamic law. They, therefore, found an opportunity to realise their dream of living in a society regulated by *Shari'a* law and escape persecution at home.¹

Personal recruiting networks and online propaganda outlets, such as ISIS' widely-distributed Russian-language *Istok* magazine, played a crucial role in mobilising young Muslims in the North Caucasus by actively calling on them to join the Islamic state. In the Islamic state, Muslims would finally be able to live according to their faith and the *Shari'a*. As expressed in the *Istok* magazine, "The Islamic State is fighting to ensure the supremacy of the word of Allah. And there is no supremacy of the word of Allah until we establish Sharia [law]."² Within the Islamic States, Muslims would feel safe and would no longer be persecuted. All other lands where Muslims lived, or even lands ruled at the time by Muslim rulers, were not considered genuinely Muslim, as no Muslim laws were enforced correctly.³ The existence of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria reinforced this paradigm even further and proved to be a potent recruitment tool. In the Middle East, young Muslims from the North Caucasus saw a controlled territory and a chance to realize their dreams of living in a society regulated by *Shari'a* law.⁴ As noted by a Dagestani citizen who had met an ISIS recruiter: "He [*the recruiter* – authors] praised the Islamic state. He stated that the Islamic State was an authentic state for Muslims, a real Caliphate. If you are a true Muslim, he added, you must travel to the Islamic State and help them build a strong Islamic state. You cannot live and serve in a non-Muslim state."⁵

ISIS recruiters made clear that it was the individual duty (*fard 'ayn*) of every young Muslim to join his brothers and sisters in Syria and the Levant to fight on the side of the Islamic State.⁶ Appeals were made to join the fight or *jihad* against the Crusaders, from "both the West [*France, the United States and other European countries* – authors] and the East [i.e., *Russia* – authors]," who were conducting a "war of aggression against Muslims," in their attempts to destroy the Islamic State.⁷ Muslims were encouraged to attack Russia and the West through terrorist acts, which would ensure that "the Crusaders would taste suffering that they had not expected."⁸ Those ISIS "martyrs" who had perished in their attempts to hit the West (during the Paris 2015 attacks, for example) were to be revered as "heroes of monotheism and *jihad*," who "had given their souls to the noblest of causes."⁹ In an interview with an individual who had met ISIS recruiters, one of this article's authors was told: "This recruiter told us that it was imperative to travel to Syria because that is where 'real *jihad*' is currently taking place. Soon the Day of Judgement will come, and Muslims have to take the right side."¹⁰

These calls for *jihad* resonated strongly within elements of the Dagestani society, primarily because the religiosity among Muslims in this republic had become exceptionally high by then. A large-scale sociological survey conducted by the Ministry

1 Personal interview by one of the authors with relatives of ISIS travellers. Dagestan, 2017.

2 Благо в установлении Исламского государства // Исток. Выпуск 3.

3 Ibid.

4 Interview by authors with relatives of ISIS travellers. Dagestan, 2017.

5 Interview by authors with individuals who met an ISIS recruiter. Dagestan, 2015.

6 Дни расплаты // Исток. Выпуск 3, 3.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid., 6.

10 Interview by authors with individuals who met with an ISIS recruiter. Dagestan, 2015.

of Youth Affairs of the Republic of Dagestan in 2019 brought to light the increased support for religious answers to public issues in Dagestan, especially among the young.¹ To the question, "how should society address its problems?" 47,6% of those interviewed among the Dagestani youth indicated a preference for religious norms and *Shari'a* law, as opposed to "science and secular laws," a response supported only by 30,1% of the respondents.² The same survey showed that 52% of young Dagestanis considered that Muslims should not, in any way, engage in any activity that contradicted *Shari'a* law in the conduct of their official duties. In comparison, only 6,6% of those interviewed noted that Dagestanis should fulfil their duties regardless, even if they contradicted *Shari'a* law. These surveys indicate that firstly, a significant number of Muslims in Dagestan wished to live in an Islamic state (even if they were not entirely familiar with *Shari'a* law) and secondly, that their first identity and attachment was towards the Muslim *ummah* – rather than towards the Russian state or their ethnic nationality. This perception by Dagestani Muslims of belonging to a broader Islamic community was reinforced from 2000 to 2010 as a result of the strengthening of Islamist traditions and the spread of Islamic education inside Dagestan.³

This explains why so many Muslims from Dagestan felt the need to travel to the region and fight *jihad* in support of their co-religionaries. It has been estimated that roughly 5,000 young Muslims from Dagestan moved to Syria and Iraq to fight *jihad* against B. Assad's forces and support ISIS or simply raise their families in an Islamic state and live under *Shari'a* law.⁴ Within the Caucasus Emirate insurgency movement, in turn, many senior rebel leaders began in 2014 and 2015 to pledge allegiance to the *Islamic State*, setting up, in this way, a branch of ISIS in the North Caucasus – the *Wilayah al-Qawqaz*.⁵ These defections and the drain of many North Caucasian fighters to fight in Syria and Iraq created a significant concern among Caucasus Emirate *jihadists* that their movement would become fragmented and eventually be absorbed into ISIS. D. Umarov and his successor in 2013, Emir A.A. Mukhammad al-Dagastani, therefore, tried hard to convince local Muslim fighters that the North Caucasus *jihad* had to take precedence over the *jihad* in Syria – even though both struggles were considered part of the same global Islamist fight against the "infidels."⁶

Conclusion

There is little doubt that the spread of Salafi trends and more extreme Salafi-*jihadist* ideologies in the eastern North Caucasus republics of Chechnya and Dagestan owes a great deal to the arrival of foreign fighters and preachers to the region in the mid-1990s, many of whom came to Chechnya with the outbreak of the war in 1994–1995. The First Chechen war became a significant catalyst for the radicalisation

1 Final Analytical and Information Report of the Ministry of Youth Affairs of the Republic of Dagestan on the implementation of continuous sociological monitoring and analysis of the situation in the Republic of Dagestan in order to identify the causes of extremist manifestations among young people in 2015,» Ministry of Youth Affairs of the Republic of Dagestan, 2015. (Personal archive of one of the authors).

2 Абдулагатов 2019, 75.

3 Sagramoso, Yarlykapov 2020, 49.

4 Yarlykapov 2018b; Yarlykapov 2018a, 178.

5 Mairbek Vatchagaev, "Strategy and Perspectives on Dokka Umarov's Rapprochement with the Radicals," North Caucasus Weekly, May 2007.

6 Joanna Paraszczuk, "The Clear Banner: The Clash over 'Real Jihad' in Syria: ISIS vs. the Caucasus Emirate," Jihadology, June 6, 2014.

of local Salafi communities and a powerful “attraction pole” for young individuals from the Middle East. They were eager to fight *jihad* to protect their fellow Muslims under attack. Figures such as Khattab and Sheikh Fathi proved instrumental in transforming the Chechen insurgency from a separatist movement into a religious *jihad* against the Russian “infidel” state. Their proselytising activities and military-training efforts affected quite significantly specific sectors of the Chechen insurgency movement, leading to the latter’s further radicalization. However, it is essential to highlight that Salafi communities and radical Salafi preachers already existed in the region before the outbreak of the Chechen war. Individuals such as B. Kebedov in Dagestan or I. Khamilov in Chechnya had already set up their Salafi communities or *jamaats* in the late 1970s–early 1990s. Together with the foreign fighters who arrived in the region during the 1990s, they played a significant role in transforming local Islamic communities into fighting *jamaats* once conflict broke out in Chechnya. During the Chechen inter-war period, they tried to implement their more radical projects, which involved establishing an Islamic state in the North Caucasus that would encompass Chechnya and Dagestan and neighbouring Ingushetia. For some, like M. Udugov, this Islamic state had to become the seat of “global *jihad*.”

Yet, despite the efforts of both local and foreign Salafis to transform the eastern North Caucasus, and in particular Chechnya, into an Islamic state, Salafi projects failed to flourish. Not only were Salafi communities in Dagestan persecuted and destroyed during the Second Chechen war (and its members forced to go underground), but Chechnya lost its semi-independent status. As a result, the Islamist-*jihadist* project of the North Caucasus was denied a “safe-haven,” where it could develop, leading to its collapse. Although the North Caucasus Islamist insurgency – the Caucasus Emirate – managed to remain alive during most of the 2000s, it lost steam by the mid-2010s, primarily as a result of the effective counter-terrorist operations carried out by Russian federal forces and their local allies. Furthermore, most foreign *jihadist* fighters were also eliminated during these campaigns. Devoid of finance and manpower, they increasingly lost influence. More importantly, the Islamist projects failed to obtain the support of the majority of the local populations in the North Caucasus. As highlighted above, not many Muslims in Chechnya or Dagestan proved eager to embrace Salafism in the late 1990s and early 2000s. For most local Muslims, the more rigid forms of Islam promoted by foreign *jihadists* and local Salafis proved alien to their local traditions. Sufi forms of Islam remained predominant in the region during the 1990s and the 2000s.

The evidence available seems to indicate that Salafi currents managed nevertheless to survive and prosper among certain groups of young Muslims in the North Caucasus during the 2010s. However, this mainly occurred underground, and despite the pressure exerted on Salafi communities by the authorities. The significant outflow of foreign fighters from the North Caucasus to ISIS in Syria and Iraq in 2013–2015 is a clear testament of the continued relevance of such Salafi trends in the region. It indicates that Salafism and the desire to live in an authentic Islamic state remains alive in Chechnya and Dagestan. Yet, for many, the Salafism embraced is of a more moderate form, along the lines of the Islam preached by the Egyptian Islamic scholar al-Qardawi and his Saudi followers. As expected, these Salafi trends are no longer promoted by foreign fighters and preachers, as the latter no longer have easy access to the region. Instead, they are transmitted primarily through electronic sources.

Internet sites and social media platforms have become essential conveyors of radical Salafi views and ideas to the North Caucasus region. Yet, the role of local Islamic figures remains very relevant, as they remain essential carriers of these Salafi ideas among Muslims in the region. The evidence shows that North Caucasians have continued to embrace Salafi forms of Islam, inspired by preachers and fighters operating in other parts of the Muslim world.

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Влияние иностранных салафитов-джихадистов на развитие ислама в Чечне и Дагестане

АННОТАЦИЯ

Авторы статьи пересматривают роль иностранных боевиков в чеченских войнах и в развитии ислама в Чечне и Дагестане в 1990–2010-х гг. В статье оспаривается преобладающая в литературе точка зрения о том, что иностранные джихадисты несли главную ответственность за политическую исламизацию. Напротив, в статье утверждается, что исламистские тенденции и салафитские круги существовали на Северном Кавказе еще до начала Первой чеченской войны. В статье также утверждается, что местные салафитские джамааты в сочетании с иностранными боевиками-джихадистами обеспечили мобилизационные структуры и идеологическое обрамление для радикализации северокавказского подполья. Исследуя салафитско-джихадистский дискурс как иностранных, так и местных салафитов, действовавших в Чечне и Дагестане в 1990-х и 2000-х гг., авторы статьи показали, как иностранные салафиты влияли и помогали формировать идеологические рамки местных салафитских политиков и джихадистских групп. В заключительном разделе статьи рассматриваются события последнего десятилетия, в частности, развитие событий после появления ИГИЛ в Сирии и Ираке. В этом контексте авторы статьи делают попытку объяснить, почему многие молодые мусульмане в Дагестане стали иностранными боевиками и отправились в Сирию и Ирак, чтобы сражаться за Исламское государство. В статье делается вывод, что салафитские проекты, хотя и не были коренными в регионе, процветали в результате взаимодействия между местными салафитами и иностранными джихадистскими бойцами и вербовщиками.

КЛЮЧЕВЫЕ СЛОВА

иностранные боевики, салафитский джихадизм, Чечня, Дагестан, ИГИЛ, ислам, Северный Кавказ

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