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Chechnya and Kashmir: The Jihadist Evolution of Nationalism to Jihad and Beyond

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This article examines the transformation of the Chechen conflict from a predominantly nationalist to jihadist struggle, and compares the similar changes that took place in the Kashmiri insurgency. Using global jihadist strategy and ideology, and the accompanying influence of Al Qaida, both conflicts are shown to have taken on a new ideology and to have expanded beyond previous areas of operation. In both instances, the political leadership wrapped themselves in the mantle of political Islam (Islamism) as ensuing violence led to rapid socioeconomic transformation and social breakdown, thus allowing foreign jihadists to exert power and take up/divert the cause. In the past few years, two main groups originating in Chechnya and Kashmir have taken on Western targets and become more indoctrinated in Al Qaida's global jihadist ideology: the Caucasus Emirate (CE) and Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT). The opportunist franchising strategy of Al Qaida could come to play a role in the future of both groups, especially if the CE is able to coalesce into a more unified front. More importantly, the global jihadist attributes of the CE must begin to garner the same attention in the Western world as that of LeT.

Keywords Al Qaida, Caucasus Emirate, Chechnya, jihadist, Kashmir, local jihad

Introduction

The Chechen and Kashmiri conflicts, once indigenous nationalist movements, have been co-opted by the international jihadist movement. By the turn of the twenty-first century, the jihadists were well on their way to transforming Chechnya and the North Caucasus into a springboard for attacks into Russia and Europe, and Kashmir into a springboard for attacks into India and beyond. Since Western academia has focused much more on the developments in Kashmir, the main concentration in this paper will be Chechnya. The conflict began as a clash between competing nationalist ideologies and two core principles: the right of the people to national self-determination (and secession) versus the Russian Federation's right to protect its territorial integrity and statehood.¹ Today, the resulting "Caucasus

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Emirate” is carrying out attacks in the name of jihad in the heart of the Federation. The jihadists may well represent a minority within the Chechen resistance, but their impact must not be underestimated. While there are other players involved, the conflict has now turned into a North Caucasus problem and not simply a Chechen one. Though there are differences from Kashmir in evolution, the similarities and current nature of both conflicts are important to understand in order to correctly frame the violence. By examining the conflict through the lens of global jihadist strategy and ideology, and the accompanying influence of Al Qaida, the future outlook can be better understood. Although a confluence of factors such as Russian president Vladimir Putin’s de-democratizing and anti-federalist counter-revolution, the history of Islam in the region, endemic poverty, cultural propensities, and demographics contributed to the Chechen conflict, the timing, rhetoric, and evolution of the resistance suggest the same opportunistic hand of global jihadists seen in Kashmir.

Nationalism in Chechnya

Though the Chechen conflict began as an indigenous nationalist movement, it was not long before resistance leaders took up the banner of Islam. Jonathan Fox’s seminal quantitative assessments of the comparative impact of nationalism and religion on ethnic conflict show that religion in comparison to nationalism is even more mass-oriented.² Both religion and nationalism are common justifications for terrorism and constitute belief systems that can be essential elements of peoples’ identities; both may include guidelines for behavior that can lead to conflict; and both are associated with institutions and traditional sources of political legitimacy. While religious issues alone seem to have less of an influence on ethnic conflict than national issues, religious issues have a strong influence on nationalist conflicts and are associated with an increase in the level of rebellion.³ Civil wars, with religion as a component, are particularly dangerous, in part because they are so susceptible to being transnationalized.⁴

The end of institutionalized atheism and the relaxation of border controls following the fall of communism prompted the gradual religious reintegration of ex-Soviet Muslims within the wider Islamic world. Russia experienced an unprecedented Islamic revival with extensive construction of mosques and other Islamic institutions, an Islamic publishing boom, and the opportunity to openly observe Islamic devotion and celebrate Islamic holidays and festivals. Alongside the revival was the proliferation of a different kind of Islam, especially that of Wahhabism and Salafism, largely foreign to the majority Naqshbandiia and Qadiriia Sufi population. This came as a result of a flurry of external factors: intense political, ideological, and economic activities on the part of the official and non-official representatives of Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Afghanistan.⁵

There was a strong growth in religiosity in Chechnya and the rest of the Caucasus in the early 1990s as a reaction to the revival and decades of Soviet oppression of religion. Zelikmkhan Yandarbiev (the second Chechen president), for example, was part of a delegation that visited Mecca during the hajj in June 1992. Many other Muslims were afforded their first opportunity to fulfill the religious duty, keeping in mind Mecca is also the burial place of Imam Shamil (Naqshbandiia leader of the Murid Revolt against Russia in the 1840s) and therefore has enormous political significance for Chechens and other Caucasus peoples—Shamil was an ethnic Avar from Gimri,

Dagestan.⁶ A number of foreign Islamic foundations and organizations opened offices in Russia after the Soviet collapse. The main provider of such assistance (under the banner of *dawa*) was King Fahd of Saudi Arabia, who regularly subsidized an annual hajj. Saudi-funded “philanthropic” foundations would raise a great deal of money for the Chechen resistance. King Fahd also sponsored dozens of scholarships for those who wanted to study in Islamic universities and colleges in Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Jordan, Syria, Libya, Kuwait, the UAE, and Malaysia, and subsidized the free distribution of Qurans and Islamic literature. The Saudi “philanthropic” foundations invested heavily in the proselytizing conducted by Islamic missionaries and the organization of various Islamic training camps and courses.⁷ So with the dramatic rise in religion and foreign proselytizing came the inevitable influence of foreign Islamist hands.

The sacralization of conflict, the process through which religion evolves from being an irrelevant or secondary factor at the onset of a conflict to shaping the views, actions, and aims of one or more of the conflict’s key actors,⁸ became more widespread largely as a result of the first Chechen war in 1994. It was then that leaders began to decrease the nationalist sentiment and increase Islamist-tinged rhetoric and historical iconic references to religious wars of the past. In January 1995, in the immediate aftermath of his victory over Russian forces in the center of Grozny, first Chechen president Dudaev himself epitomized this change by declaring to the Chechen people on a televised address, “rise Chechnya, rise for the *ghazavat*,” and ending with “*Allahu Akbar*.”⁹ Dudaev’s use of political Islam was often correlated with moments of extreme urgency, or when his leadership was seriously threatened. He also successfully predicted another reason why his statements began to change in an interview with a Russian journalist before the war. Dudaev remarked, “The place for Islam in Chechnya will depend on the political situation in the republic and on the external pressure which will be exerted. That means exclusively on external factors. With the increase of negative external factors Islam is bound to grow.”¹⁰ There were also warnings prior to the beginning of the war that Russia’s emphasis on the purported Islamic threat could fuel a reactive religious fanaticism. Dudaev stated in 1991 “that Islamic fundamentalism in Chechnya presented no danger, but maintained that hostile actions by Russia could push Chechen nationalism onto a more extremist, Islamic path.”¹¹ Influenced by a resurgence of Russian nationalism that was increasingly informed by a xenophobic Orthodox Church, Moscow sought to delegitimize the movement during the first Chechen war “by depicting the rebels as ‘bandits’ and ‘Islamists.’”¹² Dudaev sensed the potential threat Russian rhetoric and external factors posed towards the radicalization of the Chechen resistance, but blindly promoted the fanatical militant forces under Shamil Basaev as an elite force within the Chechen armed forces that would spearhead the use of “shock” tactics, including terrorism and suicide attacks.

As the conflict progressed, the emergence of Islamism and jihad in Chechnya could be seen as a result of a paradox: the leadership employed Islamist rhetoric instrumentally to mobilize the population and inspire them to war against Russia, but the war itself empowered radical leaders with more serious Islamist aspirations.¹³ The group of warlords and politicians who acquired prominent positions in Chechnya because of the war drove the Islamization of the movement from the inside. This group included Shamil Basaev, Salman Raduev, Arbi and Movsar Baraev, Movladi Udugov, and Zelimkhan Yandarbiev, all of whom underwent a process of Islamization during the first war.¹⁴ Judging from interviews with Basaev

in 1994, his main goal and motivation for fighting was Chechen independence and the idea of uniting the North Caucasus, particularly Chechnya and Dagestan. He had few ideas of an Islamic state, nor did he employ Islamist rhetoric.¹⁵ However, by the end of the first war Basaev claimed, "I was the first to introduce Shariah courts on Chechen territory" and "we see ourselves as warriors of Islam and therefore don't fear death."¹⁶ Similarly, Salman Raduev's rhetoric initially focused on the uncompromising fight for an independent Chechnya and a hatred for the "empire Russia."¹⁷ In 1995, he was talking about "jihad as Allah's path" and the "duty of every Muslim to die while following that path."¹⁸

The more politically oriented individuals such as Udugov, Yandarbiev, Basaev, and Raduev put political Islam to use in their fight for power in the interwar period, seeing it as an effective weapon to boost position and discredit rivals. For example, Yandarbiev's Islamic-oriented actions came with his weak position as acting president and need for additional support and legitimacy in the run-up to the election in 1997.¹⁹ In an interview he gave to a Russian journalist in 2001 he stated: "Islamic fundamentalism is not dangerous. It's a partnership, international relations. You don't consider it a problem that Western investors tour Russia, do you? One cannot divide help into help from Wahhabis and help from others."²⁰ The total collapse of functioning state structures in Chechnya also allowed the introduction of political Islam as a tool to revive the state. In August 1996, Yandarbiev took decisive steps by decreeing the establishment of Shariah courts in which foreign Arab missionaries were invited to work. He introduced a new criminal law code copied from Sudan, opened an Islamic Youth Center in Grozny where young people were taught Wahhabism, and established a 200-strong Islamic Guard and Islamic security regiments.²¹ Monica Duffy Toft refers to "religious outbidding" as the crucial factor to explain the growth of the importance of religion within a conflict. Religious outbidding is the process through which actors in a conflict originally caused by factors other than religion tender religious bids in order to advance their position. While their religious zeal and goals might be genuine, the move is often triggered by the desire to attract resources.²² As a result, "elites may become victims of their own rhetoric, making themselves captive to policies and discourses that helped them gain power."²³ With radical leaders and the political leadership both wrapping themselves in the mantle of Islam, the Chechen conflict became ripe for foreign jihadists to take up the cause.

Nationalism in Kashmir

There were many factors that led to the insurgency in Kashmir, which also happened to begin in the 1990s: a failing political economy, internal political meddling, state sponsorship, and an Afghan jihad infrastructure. The campaign commenced in July 1988, with four bombings in Srinagar linked to the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF), a nationalist, secular party with no particular allegiance to external actors. So what was a mass uprising, underpinned by a secular-nationalist liberation struggle with considerable support, gave way to a violent assault on the Indian state, led by the Islamist Right of mainly ethnic-Kashmiri composition.²⁴ Just as in Chechnya, the growing influence of Islamist rhetoric and ideology (through political bodies like Jamaat-e-Islami) and the resurgence of transnational Islam in the wake of the mujahideen's success in driving the Soviet Union out of Afghanistan played a significant role in introducing political Islam to the conflict. As Wahhabism and

Salafism flourished in Chechnya, so it did in many parts of the world. Although there may not have been a rise in religion in Kashmir like that of Chechnya, foreign proselytizing and the influence of foreign Islamist hands certainly increased in the 1990s with the outbreak of the insurgency. The religious framing of the conflict also became more widespread as a result of the escalation of violence.

Around the same time leaders in Chechnya began to decrease nationalist sentiment and increase Islamist-tinged rhetoric and historical iconic references to religious wars of the past, the JKLF was also capitalizing on the benefits of political Islam. The leadership of the JKLF prided itself on its secular understanding of Kashmiri nationhood, but that didn't stop them from using Islamist themes in much of their mobilization and public discourse in response to Hindu/Indian violence. Motivational literature used symbols and metaphors of Islam extensively, carefully selecting militant strands of Islamic history, all the while alluding to the heroic deeds of the Prophet Muhammed. Several leaders used Islamic fables to persuade the population that jihad and martyrdom would "secure freedom" from India.²⁵ The JKLF also used the Friday *namaz* (prayer congregation) at the Jama Masjid in Srinagar to mobilize public support.²⁶ On occasions when 30–40,000 people gathered at the mosque and as soon as the imam finished prayers, the JKLF boys dispersed amongst the crowd and raised slogans—"Islam zindabad" ("long live Islam") and hum "*chahten hein azadi, azadi*" ("we want freedom").²⁷

The paradox of political Islam can be found in Kashmir as well: nationalist leadership employed Islamic slogans instrumentally to mobilize the population and inspire them to victory, but empowered radical players with more serious Islamic aspirations at the same time. Instead of coming from a group of warlords and politicians like Chechnya, the internal impetus for Islamization came from Islamist groups like Hizb-ul-Mujahideen (Ansarul Islam before the insurgency), Islami Jamiat-e-Tulaba (IJT), and the Islamic Students League (ISL). At a press conference in March 1980, the leader of the IJT, Shaikh Tajamul Islam, vowed to establish an Islamic state in Jammu and Kashmir, and in August 1980, announced he would work toward an Iranian-style Islamic revolution. The group's overall aim was to keep the freedom struggle rooted in Islam. IJT remained at the center stage of Islamist politics until 1989 and then converted itself to the Mahaz-e-Azadi to accommodate more of the Muslim population. The group believed in Jammu and Kashmir's integration with Pakistan for the short term, but really wanted to establish a pan-Islamic state.²⁸

The Hizb-ul-Mujahideen (HuM), active since the mid-1980s, and its parent political party, the Jamaat-e-Islami, were the two most important players in the evolution from nationalism to jihad. The Jamaat-e-Islami's ideologue, Saeed Ali Shah Geelani, played a key role in political discourse, aiming to discredit and displace the JKLF's agenda and provide a religious rationale for advocating Kashmir's accession to Pakistan. Geelani was one of the first to place the Kashmiri struggle within an Islamist paradigm.²⁹ HuM militants were, like the membership of the Jamaat-e-Islami, opposed to the secular mission of the JKLF. Although it was one of a vast number of jihadi groups that once worked within the JKLF, the HuM was among the most active members in the initial phase of the insurgency.³⁰ The group pledged to work for the unity of the "*ummah* and the establishment of a caliphate in addition to push the usurping India out of the state of Jammu and Kashmir."³¹ When many of the other jihadi groups began to leave the umbrella of JKLF, they consolidated under Hizb-ul-Mujahideen. With political leadership

wrapping itself in the mantle of Islam, and Islamist groups gaining power and influence, the Kashmiri conflict became yet another ripe opportunity for foreign jihadists.

Jihad in Chechnya

The rise of political Islam in conflicts comes in the form of a speedy radicalization, usually arising from rapid socioeconomic transformation or social breakdown caused by the ensuing violence. Olivier Roy observed that in the case of Afghanistan under Soviet occupation, “true politicization has arisen through militarization.”³² The experience of military conflict in Chechnya, in addition to external factors and the accompanying instrumentalization of political Islam as a resource for mobilization and inspiration, eventually allowed foreign fighters to hijack the struggle and place it in terms of a global jihad.

The appropriateness of the radical and uncompromising Islamist worldview that arose must be understood against the background of the well-documented, brutal behavior of the Russian forces during the first Chechen war. The bombing of Grozny in winter 1994–1995 devastated the city and its inhabitants. Violence in Chechen villages was no less brutal.³³ The harsh nature of the conflict caused yet more Chechen fighters to re-embrace Islam, but this religious turn could not have been welcomed by the entire population. The sudden arrival of dozens of non-Chechen Islamist volunteers of the most arrogant, rigid, and inflexible sort further alienated native Chechens. This same scenario played out in Afghanistan, as it proved more and more difficult for Afghan tribal fighters to openly resist their foreign guests as time wore on, and the Taliban became more dependent militarily upon Al Qaida than Al Qaida was on them. The adoption of a more radical version of Islam by the leading warlords and politicians made it very difficult for moderate and secular Chechens who were concerned about both the independence of their homeland and their own personal safety to resist the trend toward Islamization openly.³⁴ In addition, the success of Shamil Basaev’s units in the battle for Grozny and subsequently during the war, together with the foreign Islamists’ reputation for discipline and courage, gave politicized Islam great respect and made it very attractive to the younger fighters.³⁵

Following the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, many Muslims rallied to defend their brothers, inspired by the ideas of the Palestinian-born scholar from Jordan, Abdullah Yusuf Azzam. After the mujahideen victory, Azzam called for the creation of trans-national brigades to defend frontline Muslim communities around the world. The result was the establishment of the Ansar (or Azzam) brigades, made up of veterans of the Afghan conflict alongside new holy warriors. These brigades went to fight in several parts of the world and religious terrorism became a global phenomenon, or more precisely, a “glocal” one, in which local issues became linked to global ones. Foreign fighters, often uninvited, spontaneously joined fights to defend fellow Muslims (e.g., Bosnia, Afghanistan, Chechnya).³⁶ Embattled local elites would establish their credibility as Muslims, and then use that legitimacy to summon external help from Muslims of different races and nationalities ready to answer the call. The foreign fighters often brought cash and arms with them to satisfy what they believed to be a religious obligation to defend Islam against attacks from nonbelievers.³⁷

The first Afghan-Arabs to arrive in Chechnya were probably the group that came with an Al Qaida mujahid named Khattab in 1995.³⁸ This Saudi citizen, Samir ibn al-Suwaylim, adopted the *nom de guerre* Khattab (which was almost certainly inspired by the name of the second “rightly-guided” khalif, Umar ibn al-Khattab) and quickly became a top operations commander.³⁹ He had fought in Afghanistan from 1988 to 1993, and then later in Tajikistan. According to some accounts, as many as 300 Afghan-Arabs fought in Khattab’s so-called International Islamic Brigade (IIB) during the first Chechen war.⁴⁰ Khattab probably drew on various sources, but the Al Haramain foundation, under the umbrella of the Muslim Brotherhood, was deemed to have played a special role in Chechnya. The foundation, which has its headquarters in Riyadh, was originally established to support the jihad movement in Afghanistan, and later the spread of Wahhabism.⁴¹ Khattab, who eventually married a Dagestani Lak (sister of the Khachilaev brothers Nadir and Magomed) and settled in Chechnya,⁴² was immediately welcomed by the resistance, given his military expertise and links to Islamic funding, and was appointed to important command and training posts by Dudaev. Khattab’s principal connection, however, was with Basaev, who made him his deputy commander and chief advisor. Aslan Maskhadov would later present him with the state’s highest military decoration, the *K’oman Siy* (Honor of the Nation) Medal, for his outstanding military merits in the first Chechen war.⁴³ Khattab remained active in Chechnya until his assassination by a FSB poison letter in March 2002.

As many as 2,000 Chechen fighters were sent to Taliban camps in Pakistan in August 1996 for three months’ training, which also included instruction in the basics of Islam and Shariah.⁴⁴ At the same time, training camps financed by Islamic charities were established in Chechnya under the leadership of Khattab and in cooperation with Basaev.⁴⁵ In August 1999, 1,200–2,000 fighters under Basaev and Khattab invaded Dagestan from Chechnya with the goal of establishing a *jamaat* or “Islamic Republic of the North Caucasus.” This, and a series of five terrorist bombings (four in Moscow), pushed the Russian authorities to renew the war. The second Chechen war saw a continuation of the alliance between warlords and foreign jihadi fighters in command roles, as well as an influx of fresh recruits from abroad. A process of “Palestinization” also took place, where the older nationalist elements of the resistance movement were displaced or supplanted by Islamist commanders and a younger cohort of militant Chechens that rallied around them.⁴⁶

The extent of the Islamization became clear from changes in what Geertz termed “parapolitical warfare”—forms of language and dress or appearance. In the 1990s, the struggle for a secular nationalist vision of an independent Chechnya was reflected in the idiom of the conflict; Russian forces were generally termed by ethnic criteria or by the even more secular designation “the federals” and “occupiers,” whereas Chechen collaborators were termed “puppets.” From 2000 on, the war was steadily framed as a jihad by mujahideen and martyrs against “infidels” and their Chechen “traitors to the faith.”⁴⁷ In war-ravaged Chechnya, the slogans of foreign jihadists seemed to be more and more the solution for society’s problems. “People are fed up with the disorder all around them,” said an unidentified professor at the University of Grozny to a Western reporter; “They think that introducing Shariah will bring an immediate halt to crime.”⁴⁸ Although they are certainly not the only players involved in the Chechen Resistance, the global jihadists appeared to be “the only force capable of replacing old certainties and a clear social order which was previously provided by the Soviet system.”⁴⁹

Jihad in Kashmir

According to Navnita Chadha Behera, the Kashmiri insurgency of 1989–90 transformed the dynamics of the Kashmir conflict, infusing it with a greater degree of militancy and compounding its complexity. During the initial phase, the uprising split along two lines, one pressing for secession and the other for accession to Pakistan. Soon after that it was appropriated by a much smaller, well-armed, well-trained, and committed group of militants—mostly non-Kashmiri—who added a new dimension to the Kashmir problem, jihad.⁵⁰ The influx of these foreign recruits in the case of Kashmir was directly related to the Afghan mujahideen, but manifested itself through a different external factor: the hand of Pakistan.

The activities of the Hizb-ul-Mujahideen during the insurgency were strongly embraced by the Jamat-e-Islami parties in Pakistan and Pakistani-controlled Kashmir. In 1990, these parties had set a constitutional structure in place that allowed them to run the group, including a secret committee, the Jihad-Kashmir Committee. For a time the committee, made up of Pakistani and international jihadists, was the most powerful group determining the direction of jihad.⁵¹ In the early days of fighting, Hizb-ul-Mujahideen had all of its fighters trained at camps in Afghanistan, including Khalid bin Walid, Al-Farooq, and Abu Jindal. In particular, they made use of al-Badr in the Khost province, a training center that remained in use by the Kashmiri militants until the Taliban closed it in 1996.⁵² After 1996, an even greater number of Pakistani nationals, along with foreign mercenaries and recruits from Afghanistan and central Asia, began to be pumped into Kashmir by Pakistan. The primacy of terrorist groups led by ethnic Kashmiris gave way to Pakistan-run groups like the Harkat-ul-Mujahideen, the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), and Jaish-e-Mohammad.⁵³ LeT is one of many groups that were, and in all likelihood remain, directly supported by Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence, which recruited jihadi groups to infiltrate and destabilize Indian-controlled Kashmir from the very beginning.⁵⁴

The dominant jihadi organizations that arose in Kashmir practiced militant jihad and shared a pan-Islamic agenda, which shaped their political discourse. Their self-professed goal was to establish a grand Islamic Caliphate stretching across the Middle East, Kashmir, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, and Central Asia.⁵⁵ The Kashmiris' independence struggle and the right of self-determination were irrelevant. According to LeT's spiritual head, Hafiz Muhammad Saeed, "the notion of the sovereignty of the people is anti-Islamic. Only Allah is sovereign."⁵⁶ The Kashmiri jihadists, just like those found in Chechnya, do not recognize territorial nationalism, arguing that the only real ideology is the ideology of the Islamic Caliphate, transcending race, gender, and territorial boundaries.⁵⁷

Beyond Chechnya

The evolution continued in Chechnya after the first two wars and the jihadists are now well on their way to transforming the North Caucasus into a springboard for attacks into Russia and beyond. Having lost on the traditional battlefield, the resistance turned increasingly to terrorist methods and to a strategy of expanding the war throughout the region. In turn, the network facilitated the global jihadists' sustained and growing infiltration into other parts of the Federation.⁵⁸ Since many analysts define the global jihadist movement as Al Qaida and the universe of

jihadist groups that are associated with or inspired by Al Qaida, the future of the Chechen conflict must be analyzed accordingly. Since the 1980s and early 1990s, Al Qaida has tried to use other groups to further the global jihadist agenda. According to Leah Farrall, partnering with Al Qaida does not require a group to abandon its own agenda, just broaden its focus.⁵⁹ Mobilizing Muslims for global jihad is the central strategic priority of Al Qaida and Chechnya would fit nicely into the broader struggle.

Ever since the mid-1990s, Islamist and jihadist media outlets have portrayed the Chechen conflict as “theirs,” encouraging Muslims to defend their brethren in Chechnya. Extremist Imams in Europe have directed “devout Muslims from their mosques to defend the Chechen realm from the Russian Infidels.”⁶⁰ UBL employed video footage from Chechnya and made frequent references to the Chechen conflict as part of his broader struggle. The reasons for Al Qaida’s interest in Chechnya were outlined by Ayman al-Zawahiri (who in 1996 was arrested and temporarily imprisoned while trying to enter Chechnya, but was then inadvertently released by Russian authorities who never learned his true identity):

The liberation of the Caucasus would constitute a hotbed of jihad . . . and that region would [then] become the shelter of thousands of Muslim mujahidin from various parts of the Islamic world, particularly the Arab parts. This poses a direct threat to the United States. . . . If the Chechens and other Caucasian mujahidin reach the shores of the oil-rich Caspian Sea . . . [t]his will form a mujahid Islamic belt to the south of Russia that will be connected in the east with Pakistan, which is brimming with mujahidin movements in Kashmir.⁶¹

It is interesting to note the “mujahid Islamic belt” connecting Chechnya with Kashmir, which also continues to be portrayed as a linchpin of Al Qaida’s greater struggle.

A leaked 1998 U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency report revealed intelligence about the possible links between the Chechen resistance and Al Qaida, coinciding with the arrival of Khattab in early 1995. Given that Basaev spent several months at the Khost camp in 1994, we can assume that he became part of the greater jihad at this time. It was one year later that he was joined in Chechnya by Khattab.⁶² Around the time of Khattab and Basaev’s invasion into Dagestan in 1999, at least 100 Arab fighters affiliated with Al Qaida joined Chechens in the Pankisi Gorge region of Georgia, some forty miles south of Chechnya. They divided their time between helping the Chechens fight the Russians and organizing operations directed against America and its European allies.⁶³ The gorge is considered to have become a meeting point for foreign jihadi and Chechen fighters at the outbreak of the second war. There were also indications that Al Qaida was trying to establish a more permanent base in Pankisi. After a mop-up operation by Georgian security forces in May 2002, two mid-level al-Qaeda leaders were arrested.⁶⁴ There are also Georgian claims that the area was used as a specialized zone for the training of Chechens in chemical weapons. According to local intelligence, Al Qaida operatives in the region included Middle Eastern chemists skilled in the manufacture of poisons, deployed to help with preparations for unconventional attacks against American citizens and installations in Chechnya as well as other parts of the North Caucasus and Central Asia.⁶⁵

According to a 2006 RAND report, Al Qaida sees the conflict in Chechnya as a laboratory for terrorist and guerrilla warfare against a conventional military power. Training and logistical support provided has been tailored to develop operational and organizational lessons that can be applied to jihadists fighting across the Central Asian region. Al Qaida appears to think that these types of operations could destabilize a broad swath of enemy states—from Azerbaijan to Uzbekistan, Pakistan, and India.⁶⁶ With Khattab's death in spring 2002, there were speculations that the influx of money and fighters would cease. This did not happen, however, as Khattab's deputy and fellow countryman Abu al-Walid took over. Like Khattab, Abu al-Walid was considered by Russian sources to be an envoy of the Muslim Brotherhood and the connecting link between jihadists in the Pankisi Gorge, Azerbaijan, Turkey, and other centers in the Middle East.⁶⁷

Even with the ties to Al Qaida in the form of funding, training, and deployment of personnel, it was not until the summer of 2002 that Chechen resistance forces decided to expand the war to the entire North Caucasus. According to Gordon Hahn, the turning point came at a July-August 2002 expanded meeting of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria (ChRI) government, where there was a *coup d'état* of sorts for the pro-jihad forces.⁶⁸ It was attended by President Maskhadov, Basaev, the other ChRI commanders, and several foreign Al Qaida operatives and associates. One report claimed that the meeting was conducted in Arabic, with someone translating for Maskhadov. It established a Shariah-based order within the ChRI, a goal of expanding Islamist jihad throughout the North Caucasus, and a new Majlis as-Shura as the top governing body.⁶⁹ The Shura's structure adopted an Al Qaida model, having four committees—military, Shariah, finance, and information. Basaev was named the head of the Shura's military committee and deputy commander-in-chief of the ChRI's armed forces, in effect obtaining command over all the Chechen rebel forces. Several Al Qaida jihadists were appointed to other top military and political positions, including “*amir* Supyan” to chair the Shura's finance committee, “*amir* Kamad” to command the northern front, and Abu al-Walid to command the eastern front. Sheikh Abu Omar as-Saif was appointed the deputy head of the Shura's Shariah committee. The Saudi-born spent ten years working with Basaev and Khattab to establish a separate Islamic state in the North Caucasus and was probably the supreme spiritual authority among them. According to Russian intelligence, Abu Omar was also an emissary of the Muslim Brotherhood and the Haramain Foundation and arranged foreign financing for terrorism in Moscow, Chechnya, Dagestan, Ingushetiya, and North Ossetiya, including the infamous Beslan school seizure.⁷⁰

Russia's jihadist movement has moved well beyond Chechnya in the past decade. A network is expanding throughout the North Caucasus—in particular, to the five other titular Muslim republics: Ingushetiya, Dagestan, Kabardino-Balkariya (KBR), Karachaevo-Cherkessiya (KChR), and Adygeya. As attacks in Chechnya have decreased, they have increased in other North Caucasus republics. According to official MVD figures, 69 of the 561 terrorist attacks in 2003 occurred outside Chechnya, while in 2004, some 90 of just over 300 attacks occurred outside Chechnya.⁷¹ The jihadists began to apply the Al Qaida strategy of franchising local Muslim nationalist or Islamic movements into the pan-Islamic jihad by creating a network of combat *jamaats* throughout the North Caucasus.⁷²

As of 2007, the jihad in Russia has been led by a network of these *jamaats* according to *Vilayats* (provinces), falling under an umbrella organization called

the Caucasus Emirate (CE). The CE, initially created by Chechen President Dokka Umarov, is now centered outside Chechnya, in Dagestan. Nonlocal, radical variants of Islam have been able to take a stronger hold in Dagestan than in Chechnya.⁷³ Islamism also seems to be growing more extreme in the area because of government policies that alienate moderate Muslims—for example, by referring to all Muslims as Wahhabis.⁷⁴ The CE has displayed a capacity to carry out operations over an even larger geographical area, moving beyond its usual theater of operations into the heart of the Federation. On March 29, 2010, two suicide bombers detonated IEDs in Moscow's underground rail system during morning rush hour, killing 39 people. On January 24, 2011, a suicide attack at Domodedovo International Airport in Moscow killed 35 people and wounded scores more. More importantly, the CE is allying itself with the ideology and goals of Al Qaida and the global jihadist movement, including a greater territorial purview under an emirate/caliphate. The jihadists currently appear to be trying to extend their reach and establish a bridgehead in the KChR as a springboard to operations in what they call the "Nogai Steppe Vilayat," which includes Stavropol and Krasnodar Krai. This could be part of a strategy for preparing attacks in the Black Sea resort city of Sochi, the venue for the 2014 Olympic Games and a target that includes Western interests.⁷⁵ There are no longer many, if any, ideological references to Chechen history on the CE's websites. Almost all postings are of the jihadist ideological milieu, including a prominence of Abu Muhammad Al-Maqdisi, the ideologue with ties to Al Qaida who is currently under house arrest in Jordan.

As Monica Toft and Yuri Zhukov remark, "While this extremism seems to be localized for the moment, it has the potential to be global, especially if the local regional governments in coordination with the federal government continue to view all Muslims as threats to the existing political order."⁷⁶ In 2010, the CE possibly became involved directly in their first international terrorist plot. On November 23, eleven suspects belonging to a group called Shariah4Belgium were arrested in Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, Spain, Morocco, and Saudi Arabia on suspicion of planning terrorist attacks in Belgium. Two of those detained for involvement in the Belgium plot were reported to be Russian nationals, and news agencies reported they were ethnic Chechens and/or from Chechnya. These suspects were said to have been using the jihadi website *Ansar al-Mujahidin* in carrying out their activity, a site with ties to the CE.⁷⁷ Attacking Western targets would signal a new phase for the Chechen jihad, one that has the signature of Al Qaida's global jihadist ideology all over it.

Beyond Kashmir

The seeds of a larger jihad, beyond Jammu and Kashmir, were sown early on in the conflict. The Hizb-ul-Mujahideen chief, Saeed Salahuddin, announced back in 1993, "We want to hit India economically . . . and strike in every nook and corner." Then in 1998, the group openly declared its intentions to take the "war against India outside Jammu and Kashmir" and to "move towards Delhi."⁷⁸ As the jihad in Kashmir evolved, the notion of this conflict as a first battle in the war for the defense of Islam throughout India was increasingly translated into action.⁷⁹ The December 13, 2001 attack on the Parliament House in New Delhi became the first instance in which the war in Kashmir had transcended its previous geographical boundaries. Just like in Chechnya, a strategy of expanding the war is facilitating the global jihadists'

sustained and growing infiltration into other regions. This new dynamic would also fit nicely into the broader strategic struggle of Al Qaida.

In February 1998, UBL sponsored a conference in Khost, Afghanistan, attended by representatives of several jihadist groups active in Jammu and Kashmir, including the Harakat-ul-Jihad Islami, the Harakat-ul-Mujahideen, LeT, and al-Badr. UBL's goal was to lobby other groups to join his cause. The conference led to the formation of the International Islamic Front Against Jews and Crusaders, which among other things decided to commit greater resources to creating an Islamic emirate in Jammu and Kashmir which could serve as an alternate base to Afghanistan if the need arose.⁸⁰

In an April 23, 2006, audiotape broadcast on *al-Jazeera*, UBL declared war on India. For the first time, he made reference to "a Crusader-Zionist-Hindu war against the Muslims." "It is the duty of the *ummah*," he said, "with all its categories, men, women and youths, to give away themselves, their money, their experiences and all types of material support, to establish jihad, particularly in Iraq, Palestine, Afghanistan, Sudan, Kashmir, and Chechnya."⁸¹ Severing the Kashmir jihad from its traditional dependence on Pakistan, and looking instead to a global war, could prove a useful mobilization tool to groups who have been losing support. Many of the jihadi groups already have a significant non-Kashmiri component: al-Badr, Harakat-ul-Jihad-Islami, Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen, and the Jammu and Kashmir Islamic Front. However, only three have been directly linked to Al Qaida: LeT, Jaish-e-Muhammad, and Harakat-ul-Mujahideen.

The most illustrative example of the last step in evolution within the Kashmiri jihadi groups comes from LeT. The original LeT sought to institute a fundamentalist theocratic order in Pakistan while exploiting ethno-religious tension in Kashmir to trigger a wider religious revolution across the Indian state.⁸² It has primarily focused on liberating Kashmir and waging war against India, but has also waged a peripheral campaign in the form of training and logistical support to Al Qaida and others in Pakistani who are actively waging global jihad (much like the jihadi group led by Basaev and Khattab Chechnya). The group has also deployed cadres to fight against coalition forces in Afghanistan and provided safe haven to Al Qaida operatives in Pakistan, a number of whom have been captured in LeT safe houses.⁸³ By targeting Western nationals in Mumbai in 2008, Lashkar-e-Taiba initiated the latest phase of its campaign. As Stephen Tankel notes, "Even if Lashkar's operatives were not actively singling out Westerners for execution, targeting the Taj and Oberoi hotels still signified an evolution from the past when the group eschewed targets commonly frequented by Westerners."⁸⁴ Al Qaida (the language of UBL and Saeed suggests) had an ideological and tactical influence on the decision to open this new front.

Conclusion

There is certainly some evidence that the Chechen and Kashmiri jihadists have been integrated into the wider Al Qaida network, but it would be wrong to evaluate the existing contacts in the same manner as those of Al Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) or Al Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). However, jihadists have been successful in locating these struggles in a larger, global enterprise of pan-Islamic mobilization, a sort of Islamist solidarity. On the other hand, some of the players in these once nationalist movements have successfully internationalized their conflicts within the global jihad, bringing more money and recruits to bear against the near enemy.

In one of 2010's issues of *African Security*, Vidino, Pantucci, and Kohlman vividly traced this very same process in Somalia. Once again global jihadists, and the accompanying influence of Al Qaida, have caused a conflict to shift from local interest to a "glocal" outlook. Since 2006, top Al Qaida leaders and several official *communiqués* from Al Qaida's regional offshoots have repeatedly accused Western nations of interfering in Somalia as part of their new "crusade" and urged their followers to help fellow Muslims in the African country. The authors believe that the "possibility has to be drawn that the trajectory that Al Shabaab is following is one similar to those of other armed groups that Al Qaida has managed to attract to its vision of global jihad. If this is the path that the group is moving along, then just as in Chechnya and Kashmir, at some point Al Shabaab would have to match up to their increasingly 'global' rhetoric and launch an attack on their 'far enemies' in the West."⁸⁵

Al Qaida's focus has always been on integration, unity, growth, and gaining strategic leadership in the militant milieu. The group views external operations against the West, no matter how small, and strategic messaging as the means. So even if local groups pursue their own agendas, they can be franchised simply by undertaking some attacks against Western interests, presenting a united front, and staying on message. Al Qaida is wary of attracting criticism from other militants, so it is reticent to accept a group that has not demonstrated unified leadership within their area of operation, like Al Shabab of Somalia.⁸⁶ It would not be unreasonable to believe Al Qaida could reach out to Chechen groups in a more concrete way if the CE becomes a more unified front. The same could be said for a Kashmiri group like Lashkar-e-Taiba, which was always ideologically anti-Western but only decided to act upon these sentiments in 2008. Firstly, questions must be asked as to why the global jihadist attributes of the Chechen conflict have not attracted as much attention as Kashmir in the Western world. Given the extensive similarities in the evolution of both conflicts, the jihadist overtones coming from both regions should be treated as a potential threat. So should the opportunistic franchising strategy of Al Qaida towards these once nationalist movements.

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