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# Foreign Fighters and the Case of Chechnya: A Critical Assessment

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*The aim of this article is to explore and analyze the role of foreign fighters in the recent episodes of Russo–Chechen violence in the North Caucasus. The article begins by offering a preliminary theoretical consideration of foreign fighters, indicating how the events in Afghanistan combined with the development of a Salafi-Jihadist movement that would shape subsequent conflicts in the North Caucasus throughout the 1990s. The article will then move on to identify the role of Arab foreign fighters in Chechnya, demonstrating how a complex local and global social networks enable and motivate volunteers.*

## Introduction

The subject of foreign fighters—meaning 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—has proved an under-researched topic in classic and contemporary studies of conflict and terrorism.[1] Despite their increasingly common presence in conflicts, particularly in an Islamic context, outside governmental organisations the topic has received minimal and usually only indirect attention, often through the literature on Al Qaeda, where it is invariably confined to theoretical perspectives on *jihad*. Other factors constraining research include the fact that it is in part conducted via temporal websites; the lingua franca is Arabic; and it is largely concerned with opaque social networks that recruit, fund, and facilitate clandestinely, rendering them difficult to conceptualize and analyze with traditional techniques.[2]

Questioning the motivation, radicalization, and modus operandi of foreign *jihadi* fighters is central to understanding contemporary political violence and insurgency,

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highlighted most clearly in Iraq, where the foreign fighters, although representative of only a small fraction of the insurgency, have nonetheless exerted significant military and psychological effect to shape the battle space within an important time frame, and magnified this through highly effective, Web-centered information operations. The latter feeds a particularized narrative to the external audience's perception of the resistance to occupation, especially to potential recruits, and poses significant challenges to those tasked with countering the problem.[3]

Central to foreign fighters' ability to operate is the nature of their relationship with the less self-publicist but essentially more powerful indigenous resistance, as well as the local population, who can both have a decisive effect on the status and the not inconsiderable role that foreign fighters can play, a point that will be borne out in the Chechen example that follows. Of equal importance are the implications of the "blowback effect" foreign fighters can have upon returning to their native countries where they can and often have elected to continue their *jihadist* activities, capitalizing on the cooperative and trust networks established in the conflict zone.[4] Here, issues of intelligence, disengagement, as well as problems of immunity from prosecution regarding their extra-territorial activities, become vital.[5]

Traditional accounts of the wars in Chechnya, the case study used here, have focused primarily through the lens of post-Soviet Studies, foreign policy analysis or Russian military affairs, enabling only limited insights into the Chechen resistance and its relationship with the Muslim world.[6] Conversely, studies of transnational terrorism linked to Al Qaeda often lack the requisite understanding and contextualization of Chechnya. Together, these realities—like much of the "War on Terror"—have resulted in commonplace misinterpretation, misrepresentation, and misunderstanding; for example, in the usage of labels such as Wahhabi and in the limited appreciation of the contextual themes that have shaped the involvement of foreign fighters there, all of which contributes to the now widespread perception that Chechnya is but another *jihadi* front controlled by Al Qaeda. Thus, this article argues that a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the role of foreign fighters in Chechnya does not exist.

This article will offer an appropriate framework for analyzing the fluctuating involvement of foreign fighters in Chechnya and how they are variously fighting for local, national, and supranational ends. As a step toward understanding, the article explores four specific questions. First, it asks whether there are any theoretical and methodological implications for focusing analysis on non-territorialized combatants, as a way to situate foreign fighters in Chechnya.[7] The second section focuses on the development of a foreign fighter movement in Chechnya. Here the study examines the social backgrounds and social position of foreign fighters, and explores their role in the inter-war years, in order to get an idea of the motives that may have led volunteers to the North Caucasus. The third section of the article explores, in detail, key individuals who travelled and fought in Chechnya, noting alternative markers of identity and their implications for thinking about the networks and organizations that facilitate terrorism. Here it is argued that the connection between Chechnya and Al Qaeda, the Chechen resistance and the broader Salafi-Jihadist movement, is often mis-represented. The final sections of the article consider the role of Chechens abroad, and the radicalization of the Chechen resistance movement.

## The Concept of the Foreign Fighter

Men have volunteered to participate at the individual level as combatants in foreign conflict zones throughout history, for ideology, religion, or financial reward, or some combination of the three. In the twentieth century hundreds of young men joined those with a similar

ideological outlook in the International Brigades to fight fascism. Much earlier, in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, individuals joined the Crusades to struggle on behalf of their faith. Others have participated in combat solely for direct financial gain, acquiring in the modern setting the derogatory term "mercenaries."[8] In fact, most conflicts are usually about either, or a combination of, competition for resources or ideological/religious belief systems. However, at the level of national governments realpolitik is more likely to underpin any ideological or religious-based rhetoric and the two World Wars, the Cold War, and the Crusades can just as reasonably be explained in terms of more apolitical geo-strategic interests and aspirations.[9]

Of more interest here is the motivation of individual Muslims who make a conscious decision to join a grouping that is fighting occupation and/or aspiring for self-governance that denies their current national identity.[10] A pertinent example would be the U.S. citizen John Walker Lindh, a Muslim convert labelled "the American Taliban" who was captured by U.S. forces while fighting for the Taliban in Afghanistan in 2002. The similar actions of thousands of young Muslim men has become an important feature of post–Cold War security affairs and illustrates the strong sense of identification they have with the "imagined" community of the Salafi-Jihadi.[11]

## The *Mujahideen*: Afghanistan and Chechnya

The experience of the *mujahideen* in Afghanistan in the 1980s offered a powerful global sense of identification and subsequently became a motivating force that influenced a body of foreign fighters who became involved in the two Russo–Chechen wars and other post-communist Muslim regions of Tajikistan, Bosnia, and Kosovo. According to some reports, figures from the history of the North Caucasus have been used symbolically to shape an anti-Russian narrative that Arab groups played on from the latter part of the first Chechen war (1994–96). In the early 1980s, following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, a group of fighters formed an operational group of the Afghan *mujahideen* naming the unit, Organ of the Islamic Union of the Provinces of Northern Afghanistan after Imam Shamil.[12]

By linking the *jihad* in Afghanistan with this key historical figure from the North Caucasus, an explicit attempt was made to exploit transnational Islamic identity, equating the centuries-long, anti-Russian Chechen resistance with the aims of the *mujahideen*.[13] This was taken further by Osama bin Laden who eulogized the victories of the anti-Soviet and post-Soviet anti-Russian resistance in Afghanistan and Chechnya, respectively, explicitly stressing the role of the local *mujahideen* "accompanied by their Arab and foreign brothers."[14] We argue here that the case of Chechnya is unique precisely because three themes has shaped the influence of foreign fighters in Chechnya; these themes are the Jordanian Diaspora community, and how it managed to establish a group of volunteer fighters, how radical elements of the indigenous community hosted them, and how this relationship itself has changed since the first war.

However, it is important to recognize that the thousands of Afghan-Arabs who fought the Soviets were not a homogenous group and many sought only to defend their Afghan Muslim brothers and expel the atheistic Red Army from Muslim territory. These fighters were not "doctrainaire *jihadis*," who, inspired by their experiences, prepared to return to their home states to do battle with their national governments, nor did they harbor any interest in attacking the West.[15] Such distinctions and divisions within the foreign fighters' phenomenon are important when considering their motives and actions in Chechnya and elsewhere. Still, in conjunction with a number of events and trends in the Muslim world, the general perception of the defeat of a "Godless" superpower sharpened the sense

of transnational Muslim identity and inadvertently spawned a broader and emboldened transnational Salafi-Jihadi movement.[16]

The concept of the foreign fighter, as employed throughout this article, seeks to refer to the multiple levels of analysis, multiple roles, and multiple forms of volunteer combatants. In this sense, the article sheds light on the dual role of some individuals and groups within social networks. Accordingly, the concept of the foreign fighters is used to capture the multiple roles and motivations within social networks, shedding light on ideologues, financiers, fund-raisers, and those involved in the recruitment of volunteers, the dissemination of violent propaganda and gatekeepers who facilitate the movement of volunteers, who link terrorism and conflict.

In a sense then, the authors recognize the broader impact, indeed the ideological roots of the Salafi-Jihadist movement. However, this article focuses on the Arab dimension of foreign fighters in Chechnya. It does so in order to illustrate the dual nature of fighters in social movements, and the significant role that a specific Diaspora community can play, shaping different forms of conflict. This is important, insofar as it helps to combine fact with theory, and draws on largely neglected biographical and open source information such as trial proceedings, thereby avoiding the pitfalls of viewing and assessing political violence in Chechnya through the lens of Russian studies alone.[17] At the same time, it is argued that this focus helps to explain the shape, durability, and dynamics of the social network that links individual fighters to globalized networks, informed by the Salafi-Jihadi movement. Finally, this also enables the article to offer an exploratory theoretical account of foreign fighters in Chechnya, as volunteers with different motives that inform their identity, so as to stimulate new ideas and perspectives in studies of conflict and terrorism in global politics.[18]

## From Marx to Muhammad

Toward the end of the 1980s, nascent political dissent began to entwine with increasing Islamic revivalism across the North Caucasus.[19] The number of mosques and Islamic societies grew exponentially as Soviet controls began to relax and indigenous Islamic figures reached out to the Middle East for support. Concurrently, Gulf-based proselytizers and financiers arrived of their own volition, seeking to fill the perceived ideological and spiritual vacuum among these nominal Muslim peoples. Almost immediately, these processes fomented tension between those advocating more conservative Wahhabi and Salafi interpretations of Islam, versus the newly empowered, indigenous Sufi brotherhoods who persevered through Soviet persecution.[20] It is this dynamic between the more rigid strains of Islam and the Sufi brotherhoods with its flexible local traditions that shape the core of the struggle that continues within Chechen society and the resistance to Russian rule today.

It is important to note also that this tension did not commence with the collapse of the Soviet Union but that Chechen society and the Sufi brotherhoods have long struggled to reconcile aspirations for Shar'ia law with local customary law, known as *adat*. Previous attempts to impose the Shar'ia by Chechen and Dagestani leaders of the *gazowat*, or holy war, against the Russians have failed, although they still attained status as heroic, national figureheads.[21] This context is key to understanding the role that foreign fighters have played in the region and the level of influence they have exercised; two themes that will be explored later.

The source of the indigenous rivalry to the predominant Sufi Brotherhoods stemmed initially from those involved with the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP). In June 1990 a branch of the All-Union IRP was established by Akhmed Atayev, an elderly Dagestani

who had lived in Tajikistan. Together with Islam Khalimov, a Chechen, and the Dagestani brothers Bagautdin and Abbas Kebedov they began facilitating links with Islamist groups in the Middle East. The IRP was ideologically aligned to the mainstream Sunni movements, the Muslim Brotherhood and the Pakistani Jama'at-i Islami. It relied more on personal networks rather than formal organizational links though was instantly fragmented following the Soviet collapse.[22] A number of different strains of popular and intellectual Islam emerged from this, particularly in Dagestan, although all advocated the Islamization of North Caucasian society with the ultimate aim of yoking the republics into a single imamate.[23]

A small support network of Arab financiers and facilitators had also emerged in the Caucasus following the brief war between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the Nagornyy-Karabakh enclave, with various charities supporting the Muslim refugee community. These initial alliances between emerging indigenous Salafists in both Chechnya and Dagestan and their Middle Eastern counterparts at this critical historical juncture following the Soviet collapse was one of the key enablers that opened up the region to foreign fighters once the Russo–Chechen war erupted in December 1994.

Links between the North Caucasus and the Middle East are centuries old; Dagestan, for example, was once an important center of Islam. Relations between the two regions have been shaped by Ottoman and Russian imperial policies, particularly the latter, which caused thousands of Chechens and other North Caucasians to migrate to modern day Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Jordan. While the Chechen Diaspora communities have been largely assimilated by the sociopolitical policies of Turkey, Syria and Iraq, there still exists a unique community of around 8000 Jordanian-Chechens who have preserved their language and cultural traditions through time. Largely secular, the community is highly respected within Jordanian society and the country's politico-military elite.[24]

As Soviet travel restrictions gradually eased and the Chechen Republic began its latest quest for freedom from Russian rule, dozens of Jordanian-Chechens began to visit their newly independent homeland. Among them was an elderly veteran of the anti-Soviet war in Afghanistan, Fathi Mohammed Habib (Shaykh Ali Fathi al-Shishani). Fathi was an electrical engineer who moved to Afghanistan in 1982 to wage *jihad*. Due to a heart condition he was unable to fight and instead assisted the Afghan warlord Abdul Rasul Sayyaf's Ittehad-e Islami.[25] In 1993 he moved to Chechnya and in conjunction with local Islamists, established a Salafi Islamic jamaat known in Islamist circles as al-Jama'at al-Islamiyya.[26] Capitalizing on his Chechen ancestry, Fathi organized his group and began *da'wa* (calling) among the Chechen population in alliance with a small number of Jordanian-Chechens, quickly creating a following numbering around ninety.[27]

Shaykh Fathi was to become the most influential figure in establishing the foreign fighters' presence in the North Caucasus following the onset of the Russo–Chechen war in December 1994. His central recruitment ground was Afghanistan, rather than directly from the Middle East.[28] According to an Islamist fundraiser, Fathi was formerly a Muslim Brother, which gave him a broad-based knowledge of Islamic movements and enabled Middle Eastern institutions to channel funding to him for distribution to the Chechen resistance. He considered that the Muslim Brotherhood was too narrowly focused and that more innovative approaches were required for the Muslim cause.[29]

It was Fathi who personally invited Samir Salih Abdallah al-Suwaylim—also known as "Emir Khattab"—to Chechnya, leading to a formal military structure for the foreign fighters in Chechnya. Khattab was a young but experienced Saudi Afghan-Arab *mujahid* and he was able to build upon Fathi's political and religious work by forging strong military links between the foreign fighters and the then largely nationalist Chechen resistance. Khattab had commanded one of three Arab units that fought in the Tajik Civil War from 1992. Then

only in his early 20s, he had already demonstrated his strong leadership qualities, enabling him to attract both older Arab commanders such as Abu Bakr Aqeedah and strong backing from the Afghan field commander Abdul Rasul Sayyaf. Known as "The Khattab Group" they operated along the Afghan–Tajik border, launching incursions against the Russian and pro-Communist Tajik forces. Khattab's Arab mujahideen who fought in Tajikistan believed that they were fighting to support the country's Islamic independence, which had been won from the Soviet Union through the efforts of the Abdullah Nouri's Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP).[30]

In an interview Khattab stated that he made the decision to fight alongside the Chechens having seen television images of fighters wearing Islamic headbands, later popularized and filmed in raids such as Budyonnovsk. In early 1995, he travelled from Afghanistan to Baku, Azerbaijan in order to make arrangements to enter Chechnya, which was now engulfed in conflict as resistance to the Russian military escalated. While in Baku, Khattab received a letter from Fathi through the extant Arab network in Azerbaijan, inviting him to join the *jihad* in Chechnya.[31] In February, he formed a small unit of eight experienced Afghan-Arabs, who, with the help of a Tajik contact, travelled into Chechnya. Posing as an Arab journalist he assessed whether it was an appropriate environment for *jihad*. Deciding in the positive, he quickly set up an organizational foothold, drawing on Fathi's jamaat to bring a mixed group of around sixty Chechen/foreign recruits into a new militarized unit under his command.[32]

The most important of Khattab's early exploits was to win the acceptance of the local resistance movement, a key facet allowing the foreign fighters to operate. Khattab cultivated a close relationship with the already influential Chechen field-commander Shamil Basayev, who symbolically claimed Khattab as a "brother," a gesture that signalled to fellow Chechens that he was free to operate in the region as Basayev's guest. This had additional significance given the fiercely independent character of the Chechens, who traditionally display hostility to leadership from outside.

Khattab was able to establish and maintain his credibility in the eyes of the Chechens due to his not inconsiderable command abilities and tactical innovations, drawing on his experience of fighting the Soviet military in Afghanistan. He organized half a dozen experienced Arab commanders into small sub units that were under his general command, in turn subordinating them to the Chechen Armed Forces.[33] His most famous exploit was an audacious ambush on a Russian armored column in the Shatoy region of Chechnya.

In addition to his military prowess, Khattab had an acute awareness of the power of the media. At the dawn of the internet age, he revolutionized media and modern insurgency as never before, laying the ground for what is now the norm in Iraq and Afghanistan. His policy of "*jihad* through the media" led to an insistence that all operations were filmed.[34] He stated in one of his many interviews in March 2000 that "in the modern age, the media has become more important than rifles and guns . . . (t)hanks to (our) breaking the media siege . . . a clear shift has taken place in Russian public opinion."[35] In alliance with the skilled Chechen ideologist/propagandist Movladi Udugov, Khattab directed his audience toward particular media, the most prominent being the now defunct multilingual Jihad in Chechnya website run by Azzam Publications. The website had its own correspondent in Chechnya, Masood Al-Benin, who was killed in April 2000, as did the Arabic Voice of the Caucasus website.[36] Although a small number of *jihadi* videos had been shot in Bosnia, the filming of military operations in Chechnya and their widespread dissemination on CDs and the Internet in the second half of the 1990s provided potent propaganda for a second generation of *jihadis* in Europe and the Middle East.

Many of the de-territorialized Afghan-Arabs who fought under Khattab during the first war had similar backgrounds, reflecting the emerging patterns of foreign fighter involvement across numerous conflict zones since the end of the Cold War. As the Afghan civil war intensified following the Soviet withdrawal, in 1993 the Pakistani government made the decision to close down the Arab guesthouses that for a decade had facilitated their entry into Afghanistan. The resultant effect was to displace long-established networks from their base and force hundreds of *jihadis* to either return home and face potential imprisonment, or find a new cause. A small number chose to fight in the Tajik Civil War from 1992 and in defense of the Bosnian Muslims in the Balkans. As the dynamics of these conflicts changed, the foreign fighters migrated to new areas, particularly toward Chechnya in the mid-1990s.

In total, approximately eighty Middle Eastern Arabs fought against the Russians during the 1994–96 war, in addition to smaller numbers of North African, Turkish and Central Asian fighters.[37] Regarded by the rebel leadership as something of an anomaly, they were exploited for their ability to attract finances and materiel, through purported charities, Islamist political parties and large one-off donations from wealthy individuals in the Gulf states, although the latter were less prevalent during the early 1990s, prior to the coalescence of the violent Islamist movement into Al Qaeda in 1998. Although their military influence was negligible within the larger war effort, the foreign fighters' militant ideas and religious influence began to percolate through war-torn Chechen society after August 1996, in part hastening the divisions in Chechen society and ultimately inspiring some of the events that led to the resurgence of the Russo–Chechen war in 1999.

## Inter Bellum 1996–1999—An Islamic State?

With de facto independence secured in 1996, the Chechens began searching for an organizing principle for their new statelet, which included the status of Islam. In its new constitution, the independent Chechen Republic of Ichkeria was defined as Islamic, with little deliberation over what that actually entailed. Chechnya's first rebel President Dzokhar Dudayev had represented the inherent tensions within Chechnya's resistance. Acutely aware of his poor Muslim credentials he increasingly adopted Islamic rhetoric as the conflict developed. He appointed Islam Khalimov, a doctor who was involved in establishing the original Islamic Renaissance Party in Chechnya, as one of his advisers.[38] The Chechens also appointed Shamil Beno, a Jordanian Chechen, as foreign minister in order to raise awareness of their plight throughout the Middle East.

The war between 1994 and 1996 sharpened the sense of religious identity among Chechnya's Sovietized Sunni Muslims. The dominant Sufi Brotherhoods in the republic, the Qadiriyya and the Naqshbandiyya, played a significant role in mobilizing and uniting the resistance fighters, harking back to three centuries of Chechen resistance. However, conservative interpretations of Islam had little credence amongst the nationalist-separatist Chechen leadership and an Islamic state was not an end in itself for the vast majority, who viewed themselves as fighting for independence from Russian rule following long historic injustices, including the living memory of the mass deportation of the Chechen population to Central Asia in 1944.

Following Dudayev's assassination in April 1996, a local religious cleric, Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev, was appointed interim president of Chechnya in the tradition of a holy man providing spiritual unity in a time of crisis.[39] Yandarbiyev used his status to raise the prospect of a Chechnya under Shar'ia law and almost immediately enacted a new Criminal Code modelled on that of Sudan, empowering individuals such as Movladi Udugov and

Islam Khalimov.[40] and signalling the beginning of the struggle between the nationalist and Islamist camps in the resistance.

Khattab's vision for an Islamic State in the North Caucasus was only partially complete with the Chechens' 1996 victory. He believed that *jihad* must establish God's law in one country, which can then be used as a base for expanding the Islamic state. With this in mind, he established a number of training camps after 1996, paying young North Caucasians to attend courses in which they acquired religious training and weapons instruction.[41] A trickle of Arabs continued to arrive in the region via established networks, adding to his original core grouping. Many of them used marriage to local women as a tool to legitimize their presence.

In 1997 Aslan Maskhadov won Chechnya's formal presidential election on a secularist agenda and he was immediately opposed by an array of Islamists. They aggressively advocated that Chechnya reject Sufism and become an Islamic state based on Shar'ia law.[42] The Islamists comprised a triumvirate of local ideologues, Jordanian-Chechens, and Arab foreign fighters whose collective power was fuelled by the poverty and desperation of Chechnya's disintegrating society. For young North Caucasians, especially the Chechens, the appeal of the Salafis lay in their financial patronage and the simplicity of the religious message they preached, which was straightforward compared with the combined complexities of local customary law and the multitude of Sufi traditions and practices. An emerging generational split between those fighters who were brought up in the Soviet period and those born in the 1980s or after emerged, shifting the emphasis to the Salafi elements in the resistance during the second war.

Leading figures included Yandarbiyev; the Dagestani Islamist Bagautdin Magomedov, who decamped to Chechnya with his followers in 1997 at Yandarbiyev's invitation; the young ethnic Jordanian-Chechen Abdurakhman, who succeeded his compatriot Shaykh Fathi following the latter's death—and Abu Omar al-Saif, a Saudi religious adviser to the Chechen resistance since 1995. Using their unrivalled financial power to proselytize among the population they bought off the more extreme Chechen warlords such as Arbi Barayev, Salman Raduyev, and Abdul-Malik Mezhidov, who were themselves vying for influence through their personal fiefdoms.[43] Approximately thirty Shar'ia "courts" were established throughout the republic, under the religious guidance of the Abu Omar, who had direct contact with religious authorities in the Gulf.[44] The courts themselves received additional religious sanction from Abdurakhman who was utilized for his ability to relate to young Chechen brethren by drawing in and training Chechen scholars. The Islamists' began directing the commanders to openly defy Maskhadov's rule, leading to a major armed clash in the city of Gudermes in 1998.

In a vain attempt to assert his authority Maskhadov decreed that Abdurakhman, two of his Jordanian-Chechen deputies, and Bagautdin Magomedov leave the republic. Tellingly, he did not single out Khattab, who continued to run two-month courses at military training camps for North Caucasian youths. Pragmatism may also have influenced his decision, with Khattab able to attract funds for the isolated Chechen statelet. In 1999, with the Chechen state close to absolute collapse, Maskhadov was forced to implement Shar'ia law. His attempt to impose complex religious concepts on this devastated and highly Sovietized society failed, at the very least, to restore order.

This proved a crucial juncture in Chechen society, with the Mufti of Chechnya's Muslims Akhmed Kadyrov and a key field commander Sulim Yamadayev opposing the Islamist forces, whom they accused of undermining Chechen traditions. While they fought against the Russians during the first war, their defection laid the ground for the fundamental split in the Chechen resistance bringing significant segments of the Qadiriyya brotherhood

with them and leading ultimately to the formation of pro-Moscow Chechen militias who have sapped the resistance of manpower and effectively countered it since 1999.[45]

In parallel to the chaos enveloping Chechen society between 1996 and 1999, the neighboring republic of Dagestan experienced significant uprisings against local authorities in a complex of three villages. In December 1997, fighters from these villages and Chechnya, including Khattab's unit, attacked a Russian military garrison in Buinaksk, Dagestan, leading to the death of his deputy Abu Bakr Aqeedah.[46] Violent incidents spiralled and in April 1998 a Congress of Peoples of Chechnya and Dagestan was formed, formalizing the alliance between the Dagestani fighters under Bagautdin Magomedov and those of Khattab and Basayev, with the aim of unifying both republics.[47] Khattab's links with the Dagestanis deepened during the inter-war period and he married a woman from the village of Karamakhi, one of the three to declare itself part of the new Islamic state. The Congress launched a number of incursions into Dagestan in support of these villages in the summer of 1999 in fulfilment of Khattab's vision, leading directly to the resurgence of the Russo–Chechen wars.

## The Al Qaeda Connection

Since the resurgence of the war in 1999 the resistance has become inextricably linked with Al Qaeda in the popular mindset, particularly since 11 September 2001. This occurred for a number of reasons, including the deliberate strategy of the new Putin administration, which skilfully capitalized on the presence of the foreign fighters to successfully forge common ground with the new Bush administration in Washington.[48] Rooted to this strategy was the promulgation of the idea that hundreds of Al Qaeda–affiliated personnel were operating in Chechnya in addition to hundreds of Chechen foreign fighters fighting U.S. forces in Afghanistan. Seemingly reinforcing the Kremlin's argument, since 1999 the rebels have adopted more extreme methods, namely suicide attacks and mass hostage-takings. Yet the reality is more complex and these events must be contextualized in both the history of the North Caucasus and the Salafi-Jihadi movement in general.

The Russians adopted the consistent line that Khattab was working directly for and reported to Al Qaeda. This linkage appeared corroborated by a declassified U.S. Defence Intelligence Report that showed a document recovered from Afghanistan bearing Khattab's name, linking him to bin Laden's network.[49] Upon closer examination, however, the document is more in the style of an audit list of all active Afghan Arab foreign fighters, following the working practices established by Abdullah Azzam's Afghan Services Bureau, whereby all fighters entering Afghanistan were registered. In fact, Khattab has openly admitted meeting bin Laden in Jalalabad, eastern Afghanistan in the late 1980s.[50] However, Khattab was then only an aspiring 17-year-old *mujahid* and it was not unusual for bin Laden to meet the young Saudis he was supporting. Khattab has stated repeatedly that although bin Laden was a "good man" he had not seen him for years and co-operation was difficult due to the long distances involved.[51] In fact, the subtlety in his words masks the cleavages in their worldviews and indeed, some degree of personal rivalry.

In many interviews before his assassination, Khattab never threatened to attack the far enemy, the United States. Although it is true that a small number of individuals present in the North Caucasus have pursued the Al Qaeda agenda, the highly centralized command and control structure Khattab enforced around the foreign fighters nullified any deviation from his approach. Less interested in complex theological questions, Khattab was more a classic revolutionary military commander. According to his brother, he chose the nom de

guerre Khattab in veneration of the orthodox Caliph Umar bin al-Khattab who, he believed, realized a radical shift in the concept of Islamic military action.[52]

Abu Walid al-Ghamidi, who succeeded Khattab as commander of foreign fighters in Chechnya in 2002, stated that Khattab was a Salafi in doctrine and in style.[53] While by inclination Salafis would be opposed to Chechnya's Sufism and its practices, such as the worshipping of saints, the visitation of shrines and local customary law, Khattab was acutely aware of the sensitivities of his hosts. As in Afghanistan and Tajikistan, where Sufism was also prevalent, Khattab displayed flexibility and tolerance for local traditions, refusing to interfere in top-level political and religious debate.[54]

Two of his guiding principles in his nine-point will included: (i) Do not make the person that you gain as a friend an enemy and (ii) Do not interfere in people's domestic affairs, except to conciliate.[55] His brothers stated that he refused to fight *jihad* anywhere unless the people there adopted it and that he fought with the Chechen fighters at their invitation.[56] In a fascinating insight into his ethnic origin following his death, which may go some way to explaining his conciliatory approach, his family revealed that his Saudi mother was of Turkish origins.[57] His flexible approach was central to his success in forging relationships with the Chechens, who otherwise would have rejected him. As evidence of his success, Aslan Maskhadov did not denounce Khattab following the Islamists' challenge to his authority in 1998, focusing instead on the Jordanian Chechen and Dagestani influence.[58]

Related to this unwillingness to offend his hosts were a number of other issues that brought Khattab into direct conflict with other strains of the Salafi-Jihadi movement. Khattab's invasion of Dagestani villages in 1999 was and still is widely held as folly in the Islamist community and an action that ultimately lost the Chechens their new Islamic state, albeit one that was on the brink of collapse.[59] This viewpoint, central to Al Qaeda, contends that the Chechens are geographically isolated from the Muslim world, the movement of foreign fighters there was a temporary one and the main effort should therefore be focused elsewhere. As a result, Khattab was viewed as uncooperative by Al Qaeda figures and has been described as a "challenger" to bin Laden.[60] Affirming his independent nature after his death, Khattab's brothers highlighted that he was not a member of any political or ideological organization nor did he support internationalizing the Chechen conflict.[61]

By the late 1990s Khattab's reputation was established, he had his own network of funding from the Gulf and through his media wing had raised his profile throughout the Islamist world. Dialogue between his people and bin Laden's began with each attempting to convince the other of the righteousness of their different paths.[62] Khattab believed that *jihad* must establish God's law in one country, before forceful expansion into neighbouring areas, whereas bin Laden focused his efforts on the far enemy, the United States. Bin Laden reportedly felt that as Khattab was his junior in both experience and age, Khattab should follow his instructions. Khattab in turn believed he was close to liberating the North Caucasus from Russian rule and reportedly responded robustly to bin Laden's suggestion that he redirect his efforts.[63] Hasan al-Surayhi, who was Khattab's mentor during his time in Afghanistan, has confirmed that Khattab refused to join Al Qaeda.[64]

With their divergent paths set, tensions deepened when Khattab refused to allow large numbers of foreign fighters to enter Chechnya—on explicit instruction from the Chechens—following the beginning of the second war. At the earlier stages of the second war manpower was not an issue for the resistance and therefore most of those foreigners who entered the area used up vital resources and could contribute little to the war effort, particularly as most were poorly trained. Moreover, Chechnya is well known as one of the more difficult *jihadi* fronts, where the climate is extremely harsh and, due to linguistic and

physical differences and their dearth of local knowledge, the foreign fighters have been prone to death or capture.[65]

For these reasons, the Chechen rebels sought to regulate the number of foreign fighters, and where possible only accept those with adequate military experience, especially after the 9/11 attacks when they had to counter more effective Russian information warfare. To achieve this, Khattab employed a representative in Kandahar, known as Al-Dahak, who vetted recruits for their suitability in a Chechen guesthouse.[66] By default, the number of foreign fighters was also regulated by logistics and the difficulties of traversing the terrain. Indeed, the biographies of dozens of *jihadis* reveal their desire to fight in Chechnya, but show their failure to do so. Guidance from multilingual Islamist websites also encouraged those interested in fighting in Chechnya to first acquire military training in Afghanistan.[67]

Khattab's limitations on the numbers of fighters proved highly controversial, particularly following the collapse of the Taliban regime in late 2001 when hundreds of foreign fighters and Al Qaeda personnel were forced to seek sanctuary elsewhere. His constraints on them led to a build-up of around sixty foreign fighters in Georgia's Pankisi gorge and potentially ultimately led to him being betrayed and assassinated by Russian intelligence in May 2002.

As feared by Maskhadov's leadership, the foreign fighters who congregated in the Pankisi Gorge between 2001 and 2002 embarked on activities outside Khattab's control. Many of them were second generation foreign fighters who had neither fought the Soviets in Afghanistan nor the Russians in Chechnya. Utilizing Pankisi for training and procurement purposes many of them belonged to largely separate networks with differing agendas. The North African contingent, for example, belonged to the network of the Al Qaeda–affiliated GSPC leader Abu Doha, which would later form the "Chechen networks" in Europe.[68]

The Arab presence in Chechnya received high profile attention in Colin Powell's now infamous speech to the UN in February 2003 when he linked Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's group to Chechnya's foreign fighters. Powell described one Abu Atiya (Adnan Mohammad Siddiq) as Zarqawi's Jordanian representative in the Caucasus. Abu Atiya was reportedly a veteran of his Afghan training camp and had been present in Chechnya since 1999.[69] Powell stated that Atiya was in turn the deputy of Abu Hafs al-Urdani, who was appointed the third leader of Chechnya's foreign fighters in April 2004 following the death of Abu Walid al-Ghamidi. Despite Powell's accusations, Abu Hafs was firmly within the inner circle of the half dozen leading Arabs in the foreign fighters' leadership and arrived in Chechnya in 1995 following his graduation from university.[70]

Although he was hitherto unknown in the public domain Abu Hafs achieved instant fame with Powell's presentation and was likely chosen as Abu Walid's preordained successor for this reason. With increased U.S. pressure on the traditional Gulf-based sources of funding established by the Saudi Arab leadership in Chechnya under Khattab then Abu Walid after 9/11, the resistance was increasingly pressed financially.[71] Under Walid the Arab leadership began departing from the parameters established by Khattab toward more comment on external affairs and an analysis of his communiqués shows increased reference to U.S. actions in Iraq. However, when he was killed in April 2004 and replaced by Abu Hafs, the latter aligned his rhetoric fully with that of Al Qaeda/Al-Zarqawi and in September 2004 announced his intention to attack the United States.[72]

In effect, the resistance attempted to diversify their sources of funding by attempting to exploit Abu Hafs's Jordanian nationality and his well publicized, if indirect and unconfirmed, linkage to Zarqawi in order to draw on the new funding networks emerging around the latter following the invasion of Iraq and his own rise to prominence. Abu Hafs was thrust into an information campaign by the new Chechen rebel leadership

under Abdul-Khalim Sadulayev following Maskhadov's death in 2005,[73] explicitly for the purposes of attracting funds to the embattled rebels as international attention, and therefore resources, were redirected toward Iraq.[74] Carefully planned propaganda videos created the appearance of his real influence in Chechen decision making for the benefit of wealthy supporters in the Middle East.

From Iraq al-Zarqawi sent messages of support to Abu Hafs via the internet, helping to boost the latter's profile.[75] Al-Zarqawi was acutely aware of the Chechen conflict given that his home town, Zarqa, hosts some of the ethnic-Jordanian Chechen population. Indeed, he left Jordan in 1999 with the intention of fighting in Chechnya.[76] This example demonstrates how the creation of figureheads by governments can strengthen virtual networks and turn into a self-fulfilling prophesy, with the resistance able to draw on new sources of funding.

In reality, only a tiny number of Al Qaeda personalities have been linked directly to the Caucasus, although in historical context, their activities largely pre-date the organization's significant activities. Key among them is Ayman al-Zawahiri himself, who travelled to the North Caucasus in December 1996 following his expulsion from Sudan. Searching for a suitable base for his followers in al-Jihad group his view thoughts on the region are as follows: "if the Chechens and other Caucasus mujahideen reach the shores of the oil rich Caspian, the only thing that will separate them from Afghanistan will be the neutral state of Turkmenistan. This will form a mujahid Islamic belt to the south of Russia. . .."[77]

He travelled with Mahmud Hisham al-Hennawi and Ahmed Salam Mabrouk, who headed al-Jihad's civil organization committee in Azerbaijan under the cover of a trading firm. Upon crossing the border into Dagestan they were arrested almost immediately and imprisoned in Makhachkala for six months.[78] Seemingly unnoticed by Russian intelligence,[79] they bribed their freedom following pressure from Dagestani Islamists and a visit from Tharwat Salah Shihatah, a key al-Zawahiri deputy from al-Jihad, after which al-Zawahiri relocated to Afghanistan to rekindle his embattled group.[80]

Notably, this trip took place before the Egyptian government's nonviolence initiative in 1997 and the response to it in the form of the Luxor massacre, which alienated many of al-Jihad's members. When al-Zawahri merged al-Jihad into bin Laden's group in 1998, deviating from the group's Egypt-centric goals, the group continued haemorrhaging supporters, including al-Zawahiri's brother.[81] When it emerged in April 2005 that al-Zawahiri's former colleague Mahmud al-Hennawi had been killed in Chechnya it begged the question of whether he continued to act on his behalf as an Al Qaeda liaison. Following his release from the Dagestani prison in 1997 al-Hennawi apparently returned to Chechnya with a number of foreign fighters and continued to quietly fight on behalf of the resistance. His eulogy made no mention of Al Qaeda, describing him instead as an al-Jihad member, suggesting he abandoned al-Zawahiri.[82] Similarly, Mabrouk returned to Azerbaijan where he was later arrested and deported.[83]

A number of foreign fighters who have fought in Chechnya have subsequently become Al Qaeda operatives, including a leader of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, two of the 9/11 hijackers, and those involved in the Istanbul bombings against the U.K. embassy and other British targets. However, the only core Al Qaeda figure known to have been active in the North Caucasus was the Egyptian lawyer, Saif al-Islam al-Masri, who was reportedly on Al Qaeda's military committee. Al-Masri was captured in the Georgian crackdown on the Pankisi gorge in October 2002 and handed to the U.S. government along with 14 other Arabs.[84]

Reportedly in Chechnya during the latter half of the 1990s, he acted as a finance officer for the Benevolence International Fund (BIF), a charity that funded the Bosnian and Chechen *mujahideen*. In 1997 he reportedly communicated from Baku with the Al Qaeda

cell in Nairobi, who in turn passed him messages from Muhammad Atef (Al Qaeda's military commander) and bin Laden himself.[85] His entry to Chechnya was, like so many others, facilitated by Shaykh Fathi Muhammad, the ethnic Jordanian-Chechen.[86]

## Chechens Abroad

One of the key factors in understanding the Chechens' relationship with the Salafi-Jihadi movement concerns the presence and activities of Chechens located outside the North Caucasus. Over time the Chechens have become bound up with the trans-national foreign fighter movement and journalistic sources are replete with tales of Chechen foreign fighters in Afghanistan and Iraq. In his autobiography the Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf highlights the presence of Chechens in the Pashtun tribal belt.[87] The level of Chechen involvement in extra-territorial activities has, however, been grossly exaggerated, obscuring the nuances in a set of very specific, varied, and complex relationships.

As with the inward investment of financial and material aid to Chechnya from the Middle East during the 1990s, the Chechens' engagement with the Islamic world was not part of a coherent strategy, but rather a series of informal arrangements between individual Chechen commanders and external organizations. These began as early as March 1994 when Shamil Basayev, motivated by the Chechens' worsening relationship with Moscow, travelled to Peshawar, Pakistan on a fact-finding exercise. Basayev had already established his reputation as a competent guerrilla commander in Nagornyy Karabakh and Abkhazia, in effect commanding a unit of Chechen foreign fighters on behalf of his fellow Caucasian Muslims. He was also already an accomplished terrorist, seizing a Turkish airliner in 1990 to highlight the Chechen cause.

In Pakistan he was hosted by Tajiki fighters and established further contacts that enabled him to return to Chechnya and bring twelve members of his "Abkhaz Battalion" to Afghanistan. They were trained in defense installations, air-defense, mines and explosives in Khowst Province in eastern Afghanistan.[88] According to Basayev, a further fifty Chechens were then flown into Karachi, although they had their passports confiscated and were deported following pressure from the Russian authorities.[89]

It would appear that the onset of the war in December 1994 prevented further Chechen expeditions abroad until the inter bellum. In 1998 Chechen Defence Minister Ruslan Gelayev attended the World Muslim Congress in Pakistan, where religious overtures were made which linked the success of Chechen resistance in the first war to the global Islamic cause.[90] According to Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev, Gelayev then became a member of a special movement in Pakistan that propagandizes Islam.[91]

Besides these individual relationships, the only diplomatic recognition the fledgling Chechen state received was from the Taliban in Afghanistan in January 2000. Yandarbiyev, acting as Chechen envoy to the Middle East, led a delegation to Kandahar to meet Mullah Omar, who sanctioned the opening of a Chechen embassy in Kabul and a consulate in Kandahar.[92] Although the balance within the resistance had yet to tip in the Salafis favor following the mobilization of the Chechen population again in late 1999, the importance of this relationship lay with the fact that it heralded the beginning of the association of the Chechens with the extremist ideology of the Taliban within the international community.

When Operation Enduring Freedom commenced in Afghanistan following the 11 September 2001 attacks there were reports that hundreds of Chechens under Khattab's command had moved from Chechnya to fight the U.S. forces. Two journalists with first-hand experience of both theaters separately sought evidence of these claims among the hundreds of captured Taliban and foreign fighters and found no evidence of a single Chechen.[93] An

academic who also performed this task, again found no proof of Chechen fighters and instead traced the source of much of this reportage to a number of Northern Alliance commanders, including Mohammad Qasim Fahim, who were supported by Russian intelligence.[94] The legend of the Chechen foreign fighter was born.

The presence of Chechens and other North Caucasians in the Middle East is due to a range of factors, encompassing education, refugee movements, the Diaspora, as well as active resistance networks.[95] Hundreds of university-age North Caucasian students are funded to attend legitimate religious education establishments in Pakistan and the Middle East.[96] In Egypt, for example, Abbas Kebedov, a founding member of the IRP in Dagestan and the brother of the notorious Dagestani Islamist Bagautdin Magomedov, teaches North Caucasians and Circassians at Al-Azhar University.[97] Religious instruction for Chechens is provided across Turkey and the Middle East and it encompasses the full range of Islamic education, from training on specific legal schools to courses on Sufism.[98] This has filled the educational void in Chechnya's devastated society. Thousands of Chechens are also provided with funding by benevolent societies in the Gulf to perform the Hajj.[99]

Although a small number of Chechens have been processed through unregulated madrassas in Pakistan[100] the spectre of Chechen foreign fighters continues to prompt incredulity from Chechen rebels who say that although limited numbers of fighters have received instruction abroad, they have a considerable enough fight on their hands with the Russians.[101] Since 2000, with the advent of pro-Moscow Chechen militias the rebels have been increasingly squeezed and forced to seek support in any areas they are able, naturally including the Diaspora and refugee communities. Where Chechens have been engaged in illegal activities abroad it is, the Chechens insist, crucial to note that they are usually calibrated toward assisting the resistance against the Russians rather than in fulfilment of Al Qaeda's aims.[102] This includes those indigenous Salafis who conceptualize Shari'ah law and an Islamic state as a panacea to the ills of the post-Soviet North Caucasus.

## The Resistance Radicalizes

During the second war the resistance has adopted more extreme methods, namely suicide attacks and mass hostage-taking. This has naturally led to accusations that the Chechen rebel movement is now allied with Al Qaeda and that the Arab foreign fighters wield undue influence there. Although it is true that there are substantive differences between the first war and the second, the aforementioned evidence demonstrates that there is limited evidence to support the link with Al Qaeda. The following will examine the hypothesis that the Arabs have used their leverage to encourage new techniques.

Shamil Basayev has stated that he drew lessons from the experience of the Afghan-Arabs who came to Chechnya during the first war, namely Khattab and his key deputy Abu Bakr Aqeedah, Aqeedah's successor Hakim al-Medani and other sub commanders such as Yaqub al-Ghamidi and Abu Jafar al-Yemeni.[103] However, the influence of external forces over Chechen tactics and strategy in the 1990s should not be overstated. The majority of the resistance fighters had been trained in the Soviet military and the Chechens have a strong marshal culture, with boys trained on weapons from a young age. Chechen President Dzhokar Dudayev was a Soviet Air Force General and his Chief of Staff of the Chechen Armed Forces, Aslan Maskhadov, was a commander in a Soviet artillery regiment. Notably, suicide attacks were not employed during the first war.

The adoption of comparatively extreme methods during the second war is symptomatic of the changing nature of the indigenous resistance and the society of which it is a product, as opposed to increasing Arab influence. When compared with the first war, the Arabs

have yielded greater power, in part due to increased Salafi influence among the Chechens, though that has always been contingent on Chechen support. Although it is true that the Chechen Salafist commanders have dominated the resistance since 1999, that in itself did not translate into a predisposition for extreme tactics. It was Aslan Maskhadov's successor, Abdul Khalim Sadulayev, a Salafi, who halted suicide and terrorist attacks against civilians. The key factor here lies in the nature of the rebel command structure and the ability to unify and control the resistance.

From 1999 a parallel command had existed in the form of the Supreme Military Majlis ul-Shura around Basayev and Khattab versus a small coterie of loyal Maskhadov deputies. This led to an uncoordinated and disparate command structure and allowed some commanders to depart from traditional methods. In mid-2002 Maskhadov yielded to Salafi pressure and a State Defence Committee—Majlis ul Shura was formed to better coordinate the resistance and to bring the nationalist Sufi commanders together with the Salafis. Despite this, the rebel movement remained uncoordinated until Sadulayev's appointment. Sadulayev was able to bridge the secular and the Salafi divide by appealing to both factions, formally sanctioning the spread of the conflict to the North Caucasus. Although Maskhadov was the nominal head of the rebel forces, his stoical opposition to elements within his own movement undermined his command authority.

The use of strategic hostage-taking cannot be ascribed to Arab influence as it has a long tradition throughout Chechen history. There has been an Arab presence during each of the four mass hostage-taking incidents during the Russo–Chechen wars. Over the two events in Budyonnovsk in 1995 and Kizlyar in 1996 ten Arabs from Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Syria participated, two of whom were killed.[104] One Arab took a prominent role during the Moscow Theatre Siege in 2002 and two were present during Beslan in 2004.[105] In those events from the second war in particular, the Arab involvement was designed specifically to attract financial support to the resistance from the Middle East. This effect was enhanced during the theater siege by garbing the female hostage-takers in the full black veil, attire that is alien to Chechen women. Similarly, post-Beslan, the rebels released a video with a hostage-taker praying in Arabic.

However, the Moscow Theatre and Beslan school sieges should be placed in the context of the similar actions by Shamil Basayev during the siege of Budyonnovsk in 1995, where he successfully negotiated a cease-fire with the Yeltsin government. On each of these occasions, however abhorrent the act, Chechen demands have been focused on a cease-fire and the withdrawal of Russian forces. In considering the decision to use mass hostage-taking with suicidal intent in the Moscow theater siege in 2002, or indeed, the decision to extend the theater of operations to Moscow throughout 2003 using suicide bombers, analysis should not overplay Arab influence. Both the Dubrovka incident and the use of suicide attacks demonstrates while there was some Arab influence in this tactical shift, ultimately this was a Chechen decision, and one with historical precedence in Chechen honor codes.[106] From Basayev's perspective, at the most his actions during Dubrovka would secure a cease-fire and allow a regrouping of the resistance following the considerable losses inflicted on Chechen separatist groups between 2000–2002, and the growing power of pro-Kremlin Chechen forces. If this failed the siege would at least result in an infusion of cash from the Middle East. As importantly though, Dubrovka was also a result of a change in rebel leadership structure in 2002, with the creation of the semi-religious/semi-secular body of the Majlis-ul Shura, designed to unite the Maskhadov wing of the Chechen separatist movement with the radical Salafi elements. Basayev was appointed emir of the military committee of the shura thereby bestowing on him the authority to launch this operation.

There is some evidence of limited Arab involvement in the adoption of suicide attacks. The Saudi religious adviser to the Salafi elements of the resistance, Abu Omar al-Seif, issued a fatwa legitimizing the first Chechen suicide attack by Khava Barayeva in June 2000. Abu Walid has also highlighted their effectiveness. However, no Arabs have participated in suicide attacks themselves, all of which have all been perpetrated by Chechens or Nogays, a non-territorialized ethnic group allied with the resistance.[107] Although given support by Abu Omar, it is clear that the decision to utilize suicide attacks was solely a Chechen and not an Arab one. Following a meeting of leading Chechen field commanders in 2003 their continued use was advocated despite some internal opposition.[108] Their primary supporter was Shamil Basayev, although earlier suicide attacks had stemmed from within the units of Arbi Barayev and the Akhmadov brothers. Again, Chechen and Nogay participation in such attacks harks back to long standing traditions of blood feud and honor, albeit warped by the extreme circumstances of the Russo–Chechen wars.[109]

## Conclusion

In 2006 the killing of Abu Hafs al-Urdani heralded the demise of the first generation of Afghan-Arab *mujahideen* in Chechnya. Their involvement over the past fifteen years has had a profound effect on the ongoing war in the Russian North Caucasus, allowing the Putin administration to successfully portray Chechnya as another *jihadi* front controlled by Al Qaeda. However, as has been argued here, the motivations for *jihadi* fighters to support, travel, and volunteer for combat in the Chechen conflict are far more complicated, and reflect a range of motivations. In the case of Chechnya, these drivers may be dualistic, combining motivations based on religion, kinship, or ideology. In this way notions of kinship, evident in the Chechen diaspora community, alongside the opportunity presented by the end of the Cold War, the opening of borders, and globalization, created the conditions in which foreign fighters could travel to a host of post-Soviet hotspots.

Furthermore, by offering a critical assessment of the concept of the foreign fighter using the case of Chechnya, this article has demonstrated how an evolving alliance between local ideologues, ethnic Jordanian Chechens, and Arabs offers some insight into the significant influx of volunteers in the inter-war period. In doing so, the authors have argued that Arab involvement in the conflict was shaped by the precedents set by Khattab, building on the network linked to Sheikh Fathi, and gaining influence as a result of the acceptance of Khattab by Shamil Basayev. In essence the local resistance movement hosted radical Salafi-Jihadists, simultaneously illustrating how globalization has been employed by these groups in post-Soviet regions.

Although the foreign fighter movement in Chechnya has remained under relatively robust Arab command, it has been molded by events outside its control. Operating as a reactive movement, it has continually been shaped by events in other parts of the world, oscillating accordingly between moments of strength and dominance to weakness and virtual irrelevance. Equally, within Chechnya, the generational change within the resistance created a more propitious operational environment for the foreign fighters, particularly given the commensurate rise in the Salafis's influence as the younger Chechen commanders assumed increasingly important command positions.[110]

However, Arab influence in Chechnya has been in gradual decline since its heyday between 1999 and 2002, although they have retained a smooth system of succession, continuing the accommodating tradition established by Khattab (see Table 1). Evidence from other conflict zones indicates that foreign fighters have behaved brutally toward the local population. In Chechnya this was less prevalent given the highly centralized nature

**Table 1**
Arab leaders in Chechnya

| Nom de guerre | Name | Nationality | Tenure |
|---|---|---|---|
| Emir Khattab | Samir Salih Abdallah al-Suwaylim | Saudi | February '95–May '02 |
| Abu Walid | Abd al-Aziz al-Ghamidi | Saudi | May '02–April '04 |
| Abu Hafs | Yusuf Amerat | Jordanian | April '04–December '06 |
| Muhannad | Not Known | Gulf states | December '06– |

of the foreign fighters, where all units, including the Turks, were subordinate to the Arab command.[111] Abu Omar al Seif appears to be the only dissenting voice within the Arab leadership and reportedly struggled with the Salafis for control of the Arabs following the death of Abu Walid.[112] In one statement he encouraged Saudis to attack the United States in Iraq rather than the Saudi government, suggesting links with Saudi officialdom and confirming his subscription to the Wahhabi creed.[113] The Russians repeatedly claimed he was the representative of Al Haramein foundation.[114]

In addition to the Kremlin's relatively coherent and successful information campaign aimed at bounding the foreign fighters in Chechnya with Al Qaeda, Russian Special Forces have conducted a particularly effective counterinsurgency campaign against the foreign fighters in recent years. Through a system of intelligent targeting they have methodically hunted down the Arab leadership. The effect of removing a small number of key players has had strategic impact, with a dramatic drop in Chechnya's profile in the Islamist narrative internationally and a commensurate reduction in funding, as repeatedly highlighted by Chechen commanders in their appeals to the Muslim world.

Methodologically, the article demonstrates that qualitative research, informed by Social Network Analysis (SNA), allows the analyst to conceptualize the complexity of the insurgency in Chechnya (and indeed other theaters). To some extent counterintuitive to traditional counterinsurgency thinking, SNA encapsulates the insurgency in Chechnya in terms of individuals, networks, and the links that bind them, locally, regionally, and internationally. In turn this enables the analyst to disaggregate both the different cliques within an insurgency and the essence of the relationships between them. Although SNA has not been used in this article in its pure quantitative form, ultimately the approach taken provides some granularity to what has been described as the Global Insurgency[115] and avoids the tendency to view contemporary security issues in an Islamic context as inextricably linked to and inspired by Al Qaeda.

## Notes

1. Martha Crenshaw, "The Causes of Terrorism," *Comparative Politics* 13(4) (1981), pp. 379–399.

2. New techniques are now being used to remedy this analytical gap in the form of Social Network Analysis. The subject of foreign fighters has spawned a new phenomenon in itself, the cyber-jihadi researcher. See, for example, www.globalterroralert.com, accessed 10 May 2007. The site is run by Evan Kohlmann, the author of *Al-Qaida's Jihad in Europe* (Oxford: Berg, 2004), one of the first studies to focus on the foreign fighters phenomenon through the Balkans example.

3. Qualitative research methods such as Content Analysis (CA) can provide one way to develop new research techniques from disciplines such as Communication Studies. See, for example, Mohammed Hafez, "Martyrdom Mythology in Iraq: How Jihadists Frame Suicide Terrorism in Videos and Biographies," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 19 (2007), pp. 95–115.

4. Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

5. The authors recognize the problems of labelling different actors as terrorists or insurgents. Many of these terms are used interchangeably throughout the article precisely because the argument is theoretical and analytical, and no value should be attached to the usage herein.

6. Because the "second" Chechen war began in 1999 the Putin administration has severely limited uncontrolled access to Chechnya by journalists, allowing only limited snapshots of the resistance. This stands in contrast to the first war and is responsible for much of the myth-making since.

7. Quintan Wiktorowicz, "The New Global Threat: Transnational Salafis and Jihad,"*Middle East Policy* 8(4) (December 2001), pp. 18–38.

8. Among others, see, Mary Kaldor, *New and Old War: Organized Violence in a New Era* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999).

9. Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilisations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996).

10. For a detailed history of resistance to Russian imperial interventions in the North Caucasus see, Marie Bennigsen Broxup, ed., *The North Caucasus Barrier: The Russian Advance Towards the Muslim World* (London: Hurst & Co, 1996), pp. 19–194.

11. For more on the relationship between Salafism and Wahhabism see Olivier Roy, *Globalised Islam: The Search For A New Ummah* (London: Hurst & Co, 2004), p. 42.

12. According to Moshe Gammer the group was called "Rahmat Allah 'alyhi, Avvalen Rahbar-e Jangeha-ye Gorila-ye Islam,' Vatan." Moshe Gammer, "Collective Memory and Politics: Remarks on Some Competing Historical Narratives in the Caucasus and Russia and their Use of a 'National Hero'," *Caucasian Regional Studies* 4(1) (1999). Available at http://poli.vub.ac.be/publi/crs/eng/0401–03.htm0, accessed 10 May, 2006.

13. Tom De Waal and Carlotta Gall, *Chechnya: A Small Victorious War* (London: Pan Books, 1997).

14. UBL audio address (Waaqiah website in English, 14 February 2003). The website through which the audio addresses were originally disseminated, www.waaqiah.com, is now suspended from the web.

15. Fawaz Gerges, *The Far Enemy, Why Jihad Went Global* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 80–81.

16. Galina Yemelianova, *Russia and Islam: A Historical Survey* (London: Palgrave 2002), p. 176.

17. Although interesting, the recent work of a host of theorists falls into this bracket. These include Mark Kramer, Matthew Evangelista, and Pavel Baev. For instance, see Mark Kramer, "Guerrilla Warfare, Counterinsurgency and Terrorism in the North Caucasus: The Military Dimension of the Russian-Chechen Conflict," *Europe-Asia Studies* 57 (2005), pp. 209–290. Works such as this focus primarily on Russia foreign policy and Russian military counterinsurgency strategy, rather than a detailed analysis of Chechen political violence stemming from biographies of Chechen fighters.

18. See Cerwyn Moore, "Combating Terrorism in Russia and Uzbekistan," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 20(2) (2007), pp. 303–323.

19. For further detail see Moshe Gammer, *The Lone Wolf and the Bear* (London: Hurst & Co, 2006).

20. Yaacov Ro'I, *Islam in the Soviet Union: From World war Two to Perestroika* (London: Hurst & Co, 2000).

21. Mayrbek Vachagayev, "Chechen Society Today: Myths and Reality," *Central Asia and Caucasus* 20(2) (2003): pp. 1–9

22. See Olivier Roy, *The Foreign Policy of the Central Asian Islamic Renaissance Party* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2000).

23. For a detailed survey of this phenomenon, see Galina Yemelianova, "Sufism and Politics in the North Caucasus," *Nationalities Papers* 29(4) (2001), pp. 661–688; Aleksei Kudriavtsev, "Wahhabism: Religious Extremism in the North Caucasus," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 3 (2000), pp. 131–137.

24. Cerwyn Moore and Murad al-Shishani, "Chechnya and Jordan: An Unquestioned Relationship," *Prague Watchdog*. Available at http://www.watchdog.cz/index.php., accessed 10 May 2006. Estimates put the Chechen and Circassian Diaspora in Turkey—100,000, Jordan—8,000 Egypt—5,000, Syria—3,000, and Iraq—2,500.

25. Angelo Rasanayagam, *Afghanistan: A Modern History* (New York: IB Tauris, 2005), p. 103.

26. For a detailed analysis of the differing forms of social organization in the North Caucasus, including jammats, see Anna Zelkina, *In Quest For God and Freedom: Sufi Responses to the Russian Advance in the North Caucasus* (London: Hurst & Co, 2000). Thanks to Murad-Batal al-Shishani for this insight.

27. Jamaats differ from region to region in the North Caucasus. In some cases, the focal point of a jamaat may revolve around particular individuals such as village elders, or they may be located in certain villages. It is around either of these particular figures (such as village elders, religious figures) or areas that jamaat associations are formed. Equally, although jamaats are more often than not considered as small groups, they may have many thousands of members.

28. Interview with a member of the Jordanian-Chechen community, e-mail message to author, November 2006.

29. "Government Evidentiary Proffer Supporting the Admissibility of Co-conspirator Statements," *United States of America v. Enaam M. Arnout*, U.S. District Court, Northern District of Illinois, Eastern Division, No. 02 CR 892, Jan. 6, 2003, p.76.

30. *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*, 19 March 2005.

31. *Al Sharq al-Awsat*, 2 May 2002.

32. Ibid.

33. Key commanders included Abu Bakr Aqeedah, the alleged author of the explosives chapter in "The Encyclopaedia of Jihad"; Yaqub al-Ghamidi; Abu Jafar al-Yemeni; Hakim al-Medani. All are now deceased.

34. *Al Sharq al-Awsat*, 2 May 2002.

35. *Al-Watan al-Arabi*, 24 March 2000.

36. UBL audio address (Waaqiah website in English, 7 November 2002). The website through which the audio addresses were originally disseminated, www.waaqiah.com, is now suspended from the web. p. 187

37. Estimate by Aslan Maskhadov and his deputy, in *RFE/RL Russian Service*. Available at http://www.rferl.org/newsline/

38. Kudriavtsev, "Wahhabism: Religious Extremism in the North Caucasus," p. 132.

39. Insight from Mayrbek Vachagayev, Maskhadov's former press secretary.

40. As quoted in paper by Valery Tishkov, 'Understanding Violence for Post-Conflict Reconstruction in Chechnya,' p. 47, Cluster of Competence, The Rehabilitation of War-Torn Societies, A Project Coordinated by the Centre for Applied Studies in International Negotiations. Geneva, January 2001.

41. Dimitri Trenin and Aleksei Maleshenko, *Russia's Restless Frontier: The Chechnya Factor in Post-Soviet Russia* (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for Peace, 2004), pp. 93–96.

42. For a detailed account of the role and history of Sufi resistance in Chechnya see, Anna Zelkina, *In Quest For God and Freedom: Sufi Responses to the Russian Advance in the North Caucasus* (London: Hurst & Co, 2000).

43. For instance, Arbi Barayev organized the al-Jihad-Fisi-Sabililah Special Islamic Regiment, otherwise known as The Islamic Special Purpose Regiment (SPIR), in 1996. Similarly, Salman

Raduyev's "Lone Wolf Unit" and other indigenous militia units also became closely associated with the development of Islamic units who were deployed in 1999. It is worth noting that since 2000, a number of additional groups have been formed throughout the North Caucasus, primarily by, or with the aid of, Shamil Basayev.

44. *Nida'ul Islam*, December–January 1997–98 (Reproduced by Azzam Publications).
45. Gammer, The Lone Wolf and the Bear, 217.
46. See Aqeedah's biography in *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 21 September 1999.
47. See Basayev's declaration of an Islamic State in the *Russkiy Zhurnal*, 10 August 1999.
48. In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, President Putin was the first foreign leader to phone President Bush to express his condolences.
49. "Defense Intelligence Report Details Al Qaeda's Plans For Russia, Chechnya And WMD." Available at http://www.judicialwatch.org/cases/102/dia.pdf,accessed 17 May 2007.
50. Renaud Girard, "TCHETCHENIE: Premiers combats à l'intérieur de Grozny; Amir Khattab, soldat de l'internationale de l'islam," *Le Figaro,* 15 December 1999.
51. Interview with Khattab in *Le Figaro*, 15 December 1999.
52. *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 2 May 2002.
53. *Al-Qanah*, 20 December 2002.
54. *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 2 May 2002.
55. "Slain Arab warlord Khattab's last will urges Muslims to fight 'infidels'," *Al-Hayah*, 1 May 2002.
56. *Al-Hayah*, 4 May 2002
57. *Al-Hayah*, 1 May 2002. Rumors persisted throughout his life that Khattab was either a Jordanian-Chechen, or descendent from a Circassian tribe. A mass migration of Circassians to the Ottoman Empire occurred during the Tsarist era.
58. Mayrbek Vachagayev, who was Maskhadov's private secretary at the time, has confirmed this was the case in "The Chechen Resistance: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow," *Jamestown Foundation*, 2007. Available at http://www.jamestown.org/docs/Vachagaev-14Sep06.pdf, accessed 10 May 2007.
59. *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 12 December 2004.
60. Ibid.
61. *Al-Hayah*, 1 May 2002.
62. *Al Sharq Al-Awsat*, 12 December 2004.
63. *Al Sharq al-Awsat*, 9 December 2004 (in Arabic).
64. *Al Sharq Al-Awsat*, 25 November 2001.
65. Paul Tumelty, "The Rise and Fall of Foreign Fighters in Chechnya," *Jamestown Foundation: Terrorism Monitor* 4(2) (2006), pp. 8–10.
66. Stewart Bell, *The Martyr's Oath: The Apprenticeship of a Homegrown Terrorist* (Mississauga: Wiley, 2005), p. 111.
67. The Jihad in Chechnya website, through www.azzam.com, now discontinued, was allegedly run by UK citizen Babar Ahmed, currently facing extradition on charges linked to this. He was also linked to The Voice of the Caucasus website, www.qoqaz.net, which re-emerges periodically on the internet, though is regularly down.
68. This does not mean, however, that these networks were formed of ethnic Chechens. It is also common for those who have fought in a specific theater to incorporate it into their nom de guerre (e.g., Abdullah al-Shishani (Abdullah the Chechen)).
69. Abu Atiya was arrested in Azerbaijan on 12 August 2003 and deported to Jordan, *Space TV*, Baku, 25 September 2003.
70. BBC Monitoring, *Istanbul Anadolu'da Vakit*, 7 November 2006.
71. In an interview in December 2003 Abu Walid confirms that "donations that used to reach us from our kinfolk in the Gulf have dropped." *Al-Watan al-Arabi*, 12 December 2003.
72. Statement posted to the Islamic Dialogue Open Forum, 20 September 2004.
73. See video section of *Kavkaz Centre* website.
74. The resistance also draws on funding from the North Caucasian Diaspora.

75. See the communiqués of Al-Zarqawi and Abu Hafs on http://www.globalterroralert.com/, accessed 10 May 2007.

76. *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*, 14 May 2005.

77. Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11* (New York: Knopf, 2006), p. 249.

78. *Moscow Vek*, No. 22, 12–19 July 2002.

79. Some believe that Russian intelligence, with its large cadre of Arabists and Soviet-era links to terrorist proxies, cannot have failed to notice Al Zawahiri's presence. See "A Russian agent at the right hand of bin Laden?," *Terrorism Monitor: Jamestown Foundation* 2(1) (15 January 2004). This claim is backed by some commanders within the Chechen resistance, who refuse to deal with the Arabs. See interview with Akhmed Bakayev in *Dispatches*, Channel 4, 2005.

80. *Cairo Rose al-Yusuf*, 22 September 2001.

81. Wright, *The Looming Tower*, pp. 255–261.

82. Murad Al-Shishani and Cerwyn Moore, "From Egyptian Islamic Jihad to Chechnya: A Portrait of Mahmoud Hannawi," in Christopher Heffelfinger, ed., *Unmasking Terror: A Global Review of Terrorist Activities* (Washington: The Jamestown Foundation, 2005), pp. 367–370.

83. Communique of the Al Maqrizi Institute for Historical Studies, 17 April 2005.

84. See the testimony of al-Fadl in the *United States vs. Usama bin Laden et al*., defendants, United States District Court, Southern District of New York, Testimony of prosecution witness Jamal Ahmad Al-Fadl, 2nd sess., February 7, 2001, p. 208.

85. *United States of America v. Enaam M. Arnout*, No. 02 CR 892, pp. 75–77.

86. Ibid., p. 76.

87. Pervez Musharraf, *In the Line of Fire* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2006).

88. *Karachi Newsline*, 1–29 February, 2000.

89. *Daymohk*, 31 October 2004. According to Basayev, some of the entourage were then poisoned.

90. Valeri Tishkov, *Chechnya: Life in a Worn-Torn Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), p. 182.

91. See interview with Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev, *Vremya Novostey*, 17 December 2001.

92. *Etefaq-e Eslam*, 24 January 2000.

93. Carlotta Gall, "A Nation Challenged: The Prisoners," *New York Times*, 1 January 2002.

94. Brian Glyn Williams, "'From 'Seccessionist Rebels' to 'Al-Qaeda Shock Brigades': Assessing Russia's Efforts to Extend the Post-September 11th War on Terror to Chechnya," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 24(1) (2004), p. 205.

95. For a fuller argument of the role of the Chechen diaspora community, and indeed, the impact of North African foreign fighters alongside linkages with former Communists, see the article by the authors entitled "Unholy Alliances: Analysing Muslims and Communists in Chechnya," *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* (forthcoming, 2000).

96. During his trip to Pakistan in 1994 Shamil Basayev visited Chechen students at the International Islamic University in Islamabad. Gennday Kublitsky, "Basaev Trained His People in Afghanistan," *Itar Tass*, 7 August 1995.

97. Kebedov has denounced his brother's radical views. See Vladimir Bobrovnikov, "Al Azhar and Shar'ia Courts in Twentieth Century Caucasus," *Middle Eastern Studies* XXXVII(4) (2001), pp. 1–19.

98. Vladimir Bobrovnikov, "Al Azhar and Shar'ia Courts in Twentieth Century Caucasus," *Middle Eastern Studies* 37(4) (2001), pp. 1–24.

99. Ibid.

100. A Russian-speaking U.S. academic, Jessica Stern, personally met a number of North Caucasian students during a visit to a notorious Pakistani madrassa. See Jessica Stern, *Terror in the Name of God: Why Religious Militants Kill* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003).

101. Seven Russian Muslims were captured in Afghanistan and transferred to Guantanamo Bay. None were Chechen, although a number were from the other North Caucasus republics, indicating the ongoing processes there. See BBC Monitoring, Russian Channel 1 TV, 24 June 2004.

102. See for example, the interview with Musab, a Chechen in training in Afghanistan, *Karachi Newsline*, 1–29 February 2000.

103. *Jihad in Chechnya*, 22 February 2000; *Cairo al-Sha'b*, 7 March 2000.

104. *Al-Hayah*, 2 November 1996.

105. *Daymohk*, 31 October 2004.

106. A study on suicide attacks in Chechnya is forthcoming by the authors.

107. Ibid.

108. Paul Tumelty, "Chechnya: A Strategy for Independence," *Jamestown Foundation*, 2005. Available at: http://www.jamestown.org/news_details.php?news_id=130, accessed 10 May 2007.

109. For a full and detailed account on Chechen suicide attacks, see the report by the authors for the *Advanced Research Assessment Group*.

110. See, for instance, Cerwyn Moore, "Inter-generational Change and the Integration of Regional Groups in the Chechen Resistance," *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst* 9(9) (2007), pp. 9–11. Available at http://www.cacianalyst.org/files/070502Analyst.pdf, accessed 25 July 2007.

111. See the video, extracted from a French section of geocities.com, where Abu Walid meets and passes instructions to the Turkish commanders. Accessed and translated from the Turkish and French, November 2005, and available from the authors on request. The Turkish commander present in 2007, known as Abdullah, appears to continue to co-operate closely with the Arabs.

112. *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 31 May 2005.

113. See *MEMRI Special Dispatch*, "Voices of Al Qaida Leaders from Chechnya and Iraq," 9 January 2004. Available at www.memri.de, accessed 10 May 2007.

114. Wahhabi is a derogatory term used by the Russian authorities for all foreign fighters.

115. David Kilcullen, "Countering Global Insurgency," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 28(4) (2005), pp. 597–617.