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Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia and Emerging Threats
&
Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation and Trade

Hearing on “Islamist Extremism in Chechnya: A Threat to the U.S. Homeland?”

**Does Chechnya Represent a Strategic Terrorist Threat to the United States?
A General Assessment**

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A Brief Description of Islamists in Chechnya

There are Islamist elements inside Chechnya and the surrounding Caucasus region although their connection to any larger, global jihadist network is a question up for debate. It is this author's opinion that although there is an Islamist presence in the Chechen region, it poses little strategic threat to the United States (US) although it may pose a modest threat to US forces worldwide. This report will demonstrate exactly the nature of Chechen Islamists, how they developed, and what threat they pose to the US.

The largest contemporary Islamist threat in Chechnya and Dagestan is the Caucasus Emirate (CE), founded in 2007. The CE is currently lead by Doku Umarov and was officially created to replace the failing, separatist government of the region, the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria. While the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria wanted an independent Chechnya, the CE wants to create an Islamic Caliphate (world-state) that extends beyond the Caucasus region. In fact, it appears that CE has embarked upon a philosophically grand vision of territorial expansion.ⁱ The CE has reported connections to Al-Qaeda (AQ)ⁱⁱ, including third party financing, mainly based in Saudi Arabia. Although there are arguments whether there are larger connections between the CE and AQ, there appears to be evidence that the two are connected on more than just a superficial level.ⁱⁱⁱ It is well documented that AQ is currently more of a leaderless organization and thus has resulted to organizing and coordinating its efforts and networks via the Internet.^{iv} Therefore, it is more difficult to establish a clear connection between the two, but there is a connection, however tenuous it may be.

There are reports, however, of Osama bin Laden's chief lieutenant, Ayman al-Zawahiri, going to Chechnya with the intent of forming a base of operations there, but was unsuccessful and detained, and later released.^v It is also well known that chief Chechen rebel and terrorist Shamil Basayev had links to AQ as well, mainly through his chief lieutenant, Ibn al-Khattab (born Amir Saleh Abdullah Al-Suwailem).^{vi} There is no convincing evidence that Doku Umarov is a member of AQ, but certainly sympathizes with its larger causes. This can perhaps be demonstrated by CE websites that post links to AQ documents and AQ affiliates, including links to the AQ magazine, *Inspire*, which *may* have helped the Boston Bombers develop and deploy their bombs. It must also be mentioned that the tactics and bombs used in Boston resemble attacks carried out in Chechnya including delayed, multiple explosions, although the bombs are made slightly different.^{vii}

Additionally, in Dagestan the organization known as Shariat Jammāt poses a considerable threat, and is linked or a part of the larger CE. Its goal, allied with CE, is to establish a greater Islamic

Caliphate in the Caucasus and Shariat Jammāt aligns itself with jihadist/salafist movements and motivations.^{viii} Together, the greater jihadist threat in the Caucasus Mountains is indeed not a nationalistic Chechen movement, but a larger network of jihadist connected and networked to the global jihad. It is also more of a Caucasian threat, than a Chechen threat, emanating mostly from individuals from Dagestan.

A Brief Historical Account of the Crisis in Chechnya

Chechnya's contemporary history becomes important to world history with the demise of the Soviet Union. As the Soviet Republics were declaring independence, forming their own states free from the control of Moscow, Chechnya too decided to declare its independence from Russia. However, since it did not have the same type of autonomous status as did the other republics (for instance, Ukraine and Latvia), Russia did not recognize their right to independence. Russia eventually invaded Chechnya's autonomous district, with deadly, but surprising results. Tens of thousands of civilians were murdered; hundreds of thousands were displaced and went missing; and more so, the Russian military suffered its most humiliating defeat since its tragic war with Afghanistan. More importantly, Chechnya received quasi-independence, the right to govern itself until a full treaty could be arranged on a later date. However, that later treaty never developed. During the inter-war era of the Russo-Chechen Wars, chaos was ripe within the Republic.

The Republic's government was a failing government; corruption was rife; political murders and extrajudicial killings were rampant; and more troubling was the arrival of Wahhabism,^{ix} a form of Islam that can be very deadly. Wahhabist Islam was a surprise addition to Chechen culture. Chechnya traditionally celebrates a form of Sufi Islam, which allows for more indigenous representations of Islamic principles (for instance, it allows the celebration of ancestral "saints") and is considered one of Islam's more mystical representations. Sufism is not generally recognized by the more traditional sects. When Wahhabism made its appearance, it clashed greatly with many Chechens. An attempt was made to establish Shari'a Law, but this was met with great opposition from many ordinary Chechens. The two sides settled with an uneasy tension until 1999, when the second Russo-Chechen War began. This period is important however, because it marks the appearance of Islamic extremism within Chechnya and some of the worst terrorist acts carried out in Russia resulted from Wahhabist arrival.

The second Russo-Chechen War resulted from a group of Chechen Wahhabist terrorists invading a neighboring semi-autonomous district to Chechnya, Dagestan. Dagestan was fully under Moscow's control at this time. In combination with well-timed terrorist blasts in Russia that destroyed several apartments and killed scores, which the Russia government blamed on Chechen terrorists, Moscow invaded Chechnya for the second time. This time it resulted in thousands dead, and tens of thousands displaced and missing. However, Russia made little

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mistakes militarily and bombarded Chechnya from the air and devastated and demolished its infrastructure before allowing its ground forces inside the republic (a mistake it made in the first war that contributed to its loss). This war lasted for several more years, with terrorist operations and “clean-ups” that were not officially ended until April 15, 2009, an interesting date considering the date of the Boston Bombings. Russia has been denounced worldwide by governments, NGOs, IGOs, and the United States for its human rights atrocities during this time. It must also be noted that Chechen rebels were also guilty of grave abuses.

A Chechen Threat to the United States?

It is important to emphasize that an attack on the United States’ mainland from the Caucasus Emirate or other Chechen/Caucasian groups is highly unlikely. The Chechens are generally not preoccupied with the United States. However, one has to consider if the Chechens do become more involved with the larger global jihadi network, whether they may consider attacking the US homeland. With that considered, one would still conclude that an attack in the US homeland is highly unlikely and would probably be very unpopular inside Chechnya. In fact, CE’s command has recently stated that the larger confederated network did not have anything to do with planning, coordinating, or financing the attacks in Boston.^x Doku Umarov has also recently ordered his units and all jihadist elements inside the Caucasus not to attack civilians^{xi} and he has emphasized that his organization has no conflict with the United States.^{xii} Additionally, Chechnya’s Moscow backed president, Ramzan Kadyrov has commented on the Boston attacks stating that there is no link with the suspects to Chechnya and that these actions must be blamed on American influences.^{xiii} The CE, however, has reports on its website claiming that Russia is to blame for these attacks, and that Ramzan Kadyrov himself may have ordered the terrorist strike.^{xiv}

Although the CE has stated that it has no conflict with the US, and will not harm any civilians, including Russians, this has not always been the case.^{xv} Thus, these statements should not be trusted fully, though their implications may last at least temporarily. Soon after the establishment of the CE, Doku Umarov is noted for having stated:

“Today in Afghanistan, Iraq, Somali and Palestine our brothers are fighting. Those who attack Muslims, whoever or wherever they are, are our enemy. Our enemy is not just Russia but also America, England, Israel, for all of them are the enemy of Islam and Muslims.”^{xvi}

The US has continually condemned Russia for its human rights abuses inside Chechnya. Further, Chechens have a closer and far more worrisome matter on its hands than the United States. The CE and nationalist groups inside Chechnya direct most of their concerns towards combating the Russian Federation. Especially with the 2014 Winter Olympics approaching, it can be hypothesized that their efforts are being solely directed at targeting those sporting events, or planning other attacks inside and around Russia.^{xvii} It is likely, however, that US military,

security, and perhaps government forces that are combating jihadist elements worldwide will face a continued threat from individuals from the Chechen area; wherever the US goes, so too will some elements from regions of the world with jihadist connections. The US has already faced these foes from the Caucasus in both Iraq and Afghanistan,^{xviii} and will perhaps continue to see so as well. We can also safely predict that where there is a jihadist foothold, or where there is a chance of gaining ground for Islamist forces, some Chechens will be found there as is recently reported in the Syrian Civil War.^{xix}

The larger threat emanating from Chechnya is not against the US, but Russia itself. Chechnya is currently under the control of Moscow, which has given authoritarian powers and total control to rule Chechnya as a ruthless warlord to President Ramzan Kadyrov. He is a brutal leader and bribery, mass killings, missing persons, kid napping, narco-trafficking, sex trafficking, and Wahhabist Islam are rampant within Chechnya. Moscow keeps Kadyrov in power because he eliminates, with almost no provocation needed, any threats to Russia, which of course would be threats to his power. It is understood that any threats made to Moscow, will be mirrored by Moscow's threats to remove Kadyrov from power. To keep personal power, President Kadyrov keeps an authoritarian lid on Chechnya to prevent any attacks, and with few exceptions, he is largely successful. However, Kadyrov has his challenges, mainly from Chechens who still envision an independent country, and from more radical jihadists that believe Kadyrov is the pawn of Russian infidels. There is a greater emerging threat of an ethnic Chechen civil war where the Kadyrov regime faces off against the jihadists.^{xx} His continued leadership cannot be counted to last much longer. He may also evolve more toward the Islamists vision if he believes he is losing power; if this occurs, he could turn his forces against Russia and other states. This is only a conjecture, however.

To back up this authoritarian control, Moscow pumps billions of dollars annually into Chechnya, hoping to provide a materialist and consumerist culture that will make it seem futile to attack the hand that provides food. Russia seems to hope that by buying Chechnya off and making its economy appear booming, the lure of Wahhabist influence will not be so appealing. In short, Russia is trying to make Chechnya the Abu-Dhabi of the Caucasus. However, Russia is mistaken: you cannot buy out those individuals that want to be a part of the Chechen Jihadist Network. Their ultimate goals are to establish a worldwide Islamic Caliphate, dominated by Islam under a theocratic-authoritarian government, where Shari'a law is the law of the land. These are the Chechens the US should be concerned about and these are the Chechens that cannot be bought out by any amount of money. *If* the Boston Bombers are connected to any larger group concerning Chechnya, this is the group; and if they have set their eyes on America, then we should be concerned. However, this connection is unlikely.

If the United States has any potential threat from the Caucasus, that percent is perhaps less than 1% of the total population. What is concerning to US security about this 1% is that it is not just

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men who have become violently radicalized, but women (and perhaps children) too. We must not forget about the infamous black widows (women relatives of dead Chechens rebels who struck against Russia with deadly suicide terrorism.) Secondly, and very importantly, there is a centuries-long culture of personal vendetta in Chechnya. It is culturally accepted and actually even encouraged in some regions that if someone harms your family, you will harm them back. The possibility of vendetta killings against United States officials and civilians in retaliation for the death of Tamerlan Tsarnaev and the capture of Dzhokhar cannot be ruled out. Even if the individuals who committed the terrorist acts in Boston were not connected with the larger Jihadist network in Chechnya, people that knew these two individuals in Boston may want revenge. This is something the Wahhabist element in Chechnya could take advantage of.

Next, there are two potential groups of violent actors in Chechnya right now: the Chechen nationalist movement, and the Chechen Jihadist movement. The Chechen nationalist movement is, for all intent and purposes, diminished. Even the majority of the Chechen population that once supported this cause are worn out from twenty years of violence, and now, only want the appearance of peace and some stability and prosperity. The Religious Wahhabist element does not want peace and security or stability and prosperity. They want an independent Chechnya to create an Islamic Caliphate that extends to all areas the Prophet ever had any interest in. These people are the real threat and they are the ones usually found on foreign battlefields.

What the US should really fear is the “perfect storm”: some event causing the two sides to join forces. Currently, they fight against one another and Chechnya has always been on the verge of an "ethnic civil war." Russia knows this, which is why they give so much power to Kadyrov and tolerate his rule. This will not last; he will eventually be overthrown, and violence will return as is usually the case when ethnic tensions are checked with totalitarian powers. There is a very small percentage of Chechens that ought to concern the U.S., who they are can be predicted based on certain indicators. They are brutally fierce warriors that usually do not back down from a fight. They do not traditionally like to use suicide bombings (though this has been changing in the last decade) because they believe that is cowardly and does not bring as much honor to their ethno-nation as does standing their ground until the last possible moment. Chechnya is a culture where honor and family name are crucially important. It is also a culture where military and martial arts are highly prized, recognized and rewarded. It is a culture where boys are taught to remember how and by whose hands their male ancestors were killed. And if necessary and opportune, they might remember these facts for sinister purposes.

The US should not fear nor be frightened by Chechnya, nor the average Chechen. However, it must not be overlooked that the Chechens are some of the fiercest warriors and if they set their targets on the United States, it must be concerned. They are not your typical terrorists, and as previously stated, they will not back down. The likelihood that the region poses a strategic terrorist threat to the United States however, is minimal if existent at all.

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- ⁱ See Gordon M. Hahn, "Islam, Islamism and Politics in Eurasia Report (IIPER)." No. 66, 28, March 2013.
- ⁱⁱ See for instance, Ambassador Marc Ginsberg. "A Field Guide to Jihadi Dagestan and Chechnya." Huffington Post, April 22, 2013: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/amb-marc-ginsberg/a-field-guide-to-jihadi-d_b_3134852.html. Accessed on April 24, 2013.
- ⁱⁱⁱ See Hahn, Gordon M. 2011 (August). "Getting the Caucasus Emirate Right: A Report of the CSIS Russia and Eurasia Program." Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies.
- ^{iv} Ibid.
- ^v "Understanding Chechnya, Jihad, and the Region's Deep Ties with Al-Qaeda: Q&A with Leon Aron. <http://www.aei-ideas.org/2013/04/understanding-chechnya-jihad-and-the-regions-deep-ties-with-al-qaeda-qa-with-leon-aron/>. Accessed on April 24, 2013.
- ^{vi} Both now deceased.
- ^{vii} See, <http://news.usni.org/2013/04/19/bombing-methodology-identical-to-chechen-rebels-motivation-unclear>. Accessed April 25, 2013.
- ^{viii} Ginsberg, "A Field Guide."
- ^{ix} For an understanding of Chechen Wahhabism, see, Speckhard and Akhmedova, 2006. "The New Chechen Jihad: Militant Wahhabism as a Radical Movement and a Source of Suicide Terrorism in Post-War Chechen Society." *Democracy and Security*, 2: 103-155.
- ^x See, <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/eng/content/2013/04/21/17679.shtml>. Accessed April 24, 2013.
- ^{xi} See, <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/eng/content/2012/02/03/15745.shtml>. Accessed April 24, 2013.
- ^{xii} In a statement posted on a website loyal to the CE, a commander states that, "The Command of the Province of Dagestan indicates in this regard that the Caucasian Mujahideen are not fighting against the United States of America. We are at war with Russia, which is not only responsible for the occupation of the Caucasus, but also for heinous crimes against Muslims. See, <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/eng/content/2013/04/21/17679.shtml>. Accessed on April 24, 2013.
- ^{xiii} See, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/04/19/kadyrov-chechen-president-boston-bombing_n_3116698.html. Accessed April 24, 2013.
- ^{xiv} See, <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/eng/content/2013/04/23/17694.shtml>. Accessed April 24, 2013.
- ^{xv} In fact, there may be a larger connection to Caucasian jihadist in the United States, and Boston more specifically. See J.M. Berger, "Boston's Jihadi Past." *Foreign Policy*, April 22, 2013: http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/04/22/bostons_jihadist_past. Accessed on April 24, 2013.
- ^{xvi} It should be noted that there are many more examples of American threats spoken by CE leaders. See, Dmitry Shlapentokh, 2010. "The Rise of the Russian Khalifat: The View from the Jihadist Side." *Iran and the Caucasus*, 14: 120.
- ^{xvii} I am not alone in thinking that these will be particularly dangerous games: <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424127887323735604578439053611428368.html>. Accessed April 24, 2013.
- ^{xviii} See Hahn, Gordon M. 2011 (August). "Getting the Caucasus Emirate Right: A Report of the CSIS Russia and Eurasia Program." Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies.
- ^{xix} See, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/03/06/syria-war-rebels-chechnya-islamic-militants_n_2821197.html. Accessed April 24, 2013. See also Gordon M. Hahn, "Islam, Islamism and Politics in Eurasia Report (IIPER)." No. 66, 28, March 2013.
- ^{xx} In fact, this is already occurring in Chechnya's mountains as new operations have started with Moscow-backed Chechen forces attacking jihadist camps: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/5146e97c2.html>. Accessed on April 24, 2013.