

# A Case Study of the Kabardino-Balkaria Insurgency

## A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF IDEOLOGICAL TRENDS IN THE NORTH CAUCASUS

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Sufian Zhemukhov, *The George Washington University*  
Jean-François Ratelle, *University of Ottawa*

In recent years, the North Caucasus has experienced an upsurge of violence and terrorist acts. After the Beslan hostage crisis and its backlash on the Chechen movement's international legitimacy, there was a decrease in terrorist acts and indiscriminate violence between 2004 and 2008. Insurgency strategies in the North Caucasus changed after the establishment of the Caucasus Emirate (CE) in 2007. After Moscow's announcement of the end of counterterrorist operations in Chechnya in 2009, the situation rapidly deteriorated, leading to an increase of suicide bombings and attacks against *siloviki* (power ministry) targets in Ingushetia, Dagestan, and Chechnya. In 2010, while Ingushetia and Chechnya experienced a significant decrease in the number of violent incidents, the level of violence reached new levels in Kabardino-Balkaria and Dagestan.

An important change in insurgent ideology can partially explain the upsurge in violence and terrorist attacks across Russia. During the First Chechen War, the insurgents fought against the Russian state mainly for political and nationalist reasons. The establishment of the CE crystallized and made official a radical religious trend among insurgents that existed since the end of the first Chechen war. In fact, we can identify four competing ideologies in the North Caucasus – a nationalist trend, as well as traditional, moderate, and radical forms of Islam. Our memo first presents a genealogy of CE and its new ideology. Then we describe these four different ideologies and assess how they interact and influence the religious and political situation in Kabardino-Balkaria. Finally, we focus on the main problems that should be addressed to deal with the upsurge of violence in the republic.

### **A Genealogy of the Caucasus Emirate and its New Ideology**

During the Second Chechen War, insurgency leaders sought support from religious groups outside Chechnya to expand the insurgency across the North Caucasus. While

cooperation started between *jamaats* (Islamic councils or assemblies) in Kabardino-Balkaria and the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria (ChRI), no formal structure existed. The idea of uniting all the anti-Russian separatist and religious groups in the Caucasus belonged to Anzor Astemirov, the leader of the Kabarda-Balkaria jamaat. In 2005, Astemirov and Ingush *jamaat* leader Ilyas Gorchkhanov approached Shamil Basaev with a suggestion to unite with the Chechen jamaat to form a Caucasus-wide coalition. Basaev did not agree and suggested they subordinate themselves under the rule of the president of the ChRI, Abdul-Khalim Sadullayev. In exchange, Basaev helped insurgents in Kabardino-Balkaria organize a massive military attack on security forces in the regional capital of Nalchik in October 2005, which made Astemirov one of the most influential leaders in the Caucasus.

After the deaths of Basaev and Sadullayev in the summer of 2006, Astemirov proposed the creation of a Caucasian Emirate to Doku Umarov, the new president of the ChRI.\* The new structure absorbed the ChRI and included it as one of its regions. The CE was divided into six *vilayats* (administrative divisions). The new ideology was established at the foundation of the CE in October 2007. The establishment of the Emirate led to a clash between religious and nationalist branches inside the insurgency. A group of insurgents denounced the transformation of ChRI into CE and elected a new president of ChRI, Ahmed Zakayev. This election did not prevent the creation of the CE. Umarov became Emir and Astemirov became Kadi (ideological and judicial leader) of the Supreme Sharia Court. The Emirate had two main goals: to change the ideology from separatism/nationalism to religious extremism and to establish an Islamic state in the North Caucasus – though they see themselves as fundamentalists and claim they are fighting for jihad (holy war) against terror perpetrated by the state.

During the summer of 2010, the ideological split among the insurgency leaders continued when Chechen warlords Hussein Gakaev and Aslanbek Vadalov withdrew their oath to the Emir but did not renounce their loyalty to the CE. Many analysts and politicians claimed that the split was mainly a clash between nationalist and religious factions inside the CE. Others believed that the split was most likely about the leadership and power struggles within the movement. Recently, a change in the strategies of other *vilayats* could be observed. The Ingush *jamaat* announced its intention to stop targeting police officers to focus exclusively on nationalist issues, while the Kabarda-Balkaria-Karachai (KBK) *vilayat* announced its intention to intensify its attacks and target not only *siloviki* structures but also “hypocrites, idolators, and necromancers.”

#### **Four Main Ideological Trends in the North Caucasus**

We can identify four major ideological trends in the North Caucasus: a nationalist trend, as well as a traditional, a moderate, and a radical form of Islam. Without delving into the theological nuances, let us point out the main differences and antagonisms

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\* The Chechen republic of Ichkeria (ChRI) was the name of the unrecognized independent Chechen state between 1991 and 2000. After the beginning of the second Chechen war, the Chechen government in exile and the resistance kept the name ChRI until the establishment of the Caucasus Emirate even if Akhmad Kadyrov was elected as the new president of Chechnya in 2003.

between these ideologies.

By **radical Islam**, we mean an ideology that suggests that the law and spirit of Islam should reach all spheres of society. This ideology is rather strict and judgmental of those who do not develop themselves according to the Five Pillars of Islam. The followers of radical Islam are not inherently extremist, but within this ideology they might develop what we call an insurgency ideology. Such an insurgent ideology is characterized by terrorism and extremist behaviors such as the perception of security forces as a direct enemy, hostility towards Muslim leaders and scholars with differing beliefs and regarding them as “hypocrites” promoting anti-Islamic ideologies, and the exclusion of those who are not strict Muslims. The CE’s first leaders had a common ideological ground and agreed with each other on terrorist measures against *siloviki* and moderate Islamic leaders who “betrayed” their religion by working with the state against the CE. As *kadi* of the CE, Astemirov was responsible for judgment against “traitorous Imams.” Umarov organized actions against *siloviki* and “infidels.” However, they did not agree with respect to traditional Islam.

The religious leaders of **moderate Islam** usually oppose radical Islam and regard its followers as heretics. They openly support and are supported by state authorities. Indeed, the latter regard the development of moderate Islam as one measure against Islamic radicalization and insurgent recruitment. As regional leaders publicly declare their support for moderate Islam and Imams, the insurgents react by labelling these moderates as “traitorous imams.” Moderate Islam expands its number of followers to include all who identify themselves as Muslims whether or not they practice the Five Pillars of Islam. In an interview, Anas Pshikhachev, the leader of the moderate Islamists in Kabardino-Balkaria, stated, “Everyone who acknowledges Allah, Koran, Sunna, and the Prophet is a Muslim even if he does not observe any practices” (Kabardino-Balkarskaia Pravda, February 11, 2006). By this interpretation, Islam is not a question of active faith but passive acknowledgment. The clash between insurgency ideology and moderate Islam culminated on December 2010 with the murder of Pshikhachev.

Another trend is represented by many local scholars and intellectuals who understand **traditional Islam** as an ideology of local traditions mixed with Islam. This ideology takes its historical roots in the strong moral codex of Adyge Khabze, which was established in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and based on the philosophy of Jabag Kazanoko. The first debates between radical and traditional Muslims took place at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The prominent Circassian scholar Sultan Khan-Girei wrote in 1835 in his “Notes about Circassia” that Islamic laws were supposed to give preferences to local customs but that the new generation of religious leaders “often performs judgment by Islamic laws thus breaking the old customs.”\*

Initially, CE leaders did not share a common opinion toward traditional Islam. Some advocated radical methods including violence against civilians, which proved effective in the past, while others supported a policy of targeted assassination against adherents to moderate Islam. The ideologist of the latter, Astemirov, could be seen

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\* S. Zhemukhov, “Mirovozzrenie Khan-Gireia,” Nalchik, P. 44, 1997 (<http://lib.kbsu.ru/Elib/books/3/8/new/9/index.htm>)

more as a politician than a military commander. Indeed, the upsurge of violence in Kabardino-Balkaria coincided with his death in March 2010. Astemirov rejected the unnecessary use of violence against Muslim civilians; he sought the support of the local population and put forward a proselytizing strategy to convert moderate Muslims to radical Islam. Opposing such a policy, Umarov claimed that it was wrong to regard as the enemy only those who attacked insurgents directly.

In April 2010, Asker Jappuyev was appointed as the new leader of insurgents in Kabardino-Balkaria. The explosion of the Baksan hydroelectric power plant in July 2010, the murder of prominent Kabardian folklorist scholar Aslan Tsipinov in December 2010, attacks aiming to interfere with the local tourist industry in February 2011, and other terrorist acts against civilians have demonstrated the ideological turn among the insurgents in Kabardino-Balkaria. There was a disagreement among insurgents regarding the killing of Tsipinov, who was well known for his public activities and academic works in promoting ethnic values before Muslim ones. This is an indication that the insurgents have not yet overcome their internal disputes about the strategy to adopt against traditional Islam in Kabardino-Balkaria. Those discussions came to the public's attention when one of the insurgents stated that many Muslims could not comprehend why they should have killed Tsipinov and how his death would benefit Islam. Tsipinov's murder took place right after the killing of Pshikhachev and was conducted in the same way. While Pshikhachev was executed as a "traitorous imam," Tsipinov was blamed for heading a group of "pagans and idolators," working to revive "ancient pagan festivals," and because he "openly and overtly opposed Islam and Muslims."

The fourth ideological trend in the North Caucasus is **nationalist ideology**. While in Chechnya and Dagestan, many insurgency leaders evolved from nationalism into radical Islam, in Kabardino-Balkaria these two trends almost never interact and even confront each other. None of the Kabardian nationalist leaders in the 1990s ever tried to present themselves as devoted Muslims. On a larger scale, this can also be demonstrated by the fact that none of the thousands of Kabardian volunteers who participated in the Georgian-Abkhaz war were ever identified as supporting religious extremism or joining religious movements in Kabardino-Balkaria. At the same time, the Kabardian volunteers managed to form a political movement by establishing a non-governmental organization, the Union of Abkhaz Volunteers in Nalchik, with a rather nationalist program. Meanwhile most of the Chechen volunteers who participated in the Georgian-Abkhaz war are generally understood to have become Islamic extremists, including Shamil Basaev, their leader.

The gap between radical Islamic and nationalist ideology widened after the establishment of the CE, although its leaders did not have a common view on nationalism. While the main trend of the new CE ideology became anti-nationalist, Astemirov made several statements aiming to expand his supporters by reaching out to nationalists. On March 2009, he claimed that Sultan Sosnaliev, a Kabardian commander of the Abkhazian army during the Georgian-Abkhaz war and later a defense minister of Abkhazia, was on the side of the CE. The leader of the Union of Abkhaz Volunteers,

Alexei Bekshokov, responded that Astemirov's statement was false and that the late Sosnaliev was never connected to religious extremists. In spite of the differences in ideologies, the insurgents in Kabardino-Balkaria never regarded nationalists as their targets.

### **Conclusion**

The creation of the CE increased the coordination of insurgency groups in different regions of the North Caucasus and intensified discussions about ideology and terrorist methods. The insurgents' actions have expanded rapidly from the fight against the *siloviki* to targeting civilians for ideological motives. They are also getting more involved in the political and economic struggle between local politicians and business elites.

The new wave of terrorist attacks in Kabardino-Balkaria in the second half of 2010 and the beginning of 2011 demonstrated that the younger generation of insurgents has reconsidered their ideological positions. In the past, violence was mainly targeted against security forces as insurgents avoided terrorist acts against civilians. Now, new insurgency leaders seem to follow a different ideological path by targeting civilians including ideologists such as Tsipinov and Pshikhachev, as well as orchestrating attacks against economic targets such as the Baksan hydroelectric power plant and Elbrus tourist infrastructure. Arsen Kanokov, president of Kabardino-Balkaria, explained (without any specification) that the rise in terrorist activity could be attributed to the fact that some political groups were sponsoring insurgents to influence his reappointment. If the insurgency developed tactics of interfering with political events and even siding with political groups in Kabardino-Balkaria, it could mean that terrorist acts might increase during the upcoming national parliamentary (December 2011) and presidential (March 2012) elections.

Much depends on the position of state authorities in the near future. While officially supporting the ideologies of moderate and traditional Islam against radical Islam, the government continues to interfere with nationalist ideology, which could effectively take part in the battle to win the hearts and minds of the young people and limit the influence of radical Islam on them. Nationalist ideology in the North Caucasus has been emerging in the last two years in connection with the upcoming 2014 Sochi Olympics, which coincides with the 150th anniversary of the Circassian exile in 1864. Neither the state nor the insurgents have paid much attention to the issue of the Circassian genocide, which took place in Sochi, the last capital of independent Circassia. State authorities denounce the very existence of the Circassian question, which makes followers of the nationalist ideology more passive in their support for state policies against the insurgency. Meanwhile, analysts warn that insurgents may use the Circassian genocide issue if it is not resolved before the Olympics.

In May 2011, federal forces killed several insurgents including the KBK vilayat leader. The choice of the new leader will probably have an immediate impact on the situation and on the insurgent's tactics. However, recent history also shows that it does not necessarily mean a decrease in the level of violence.

It seems Kabardino-Balkaria is now at an important crossroads. Violence in the republic might reach unprecedented levels this summer, as the season is usually more suitable for an upsurge of terrorist attacks. As we demonstrated, the insurgents have already expanded their guerrilla activities and their recruitment propaganda aimed at young people in the republic. In February 2011, insurgency leaders called for mobilization of all their forces in response to the announcement of the counter-terrorist operation in Kabardino-Balkaria. Uncontrolled repression of the followers of radical Islam by *siloviki*, as in 2005, might feed insurgency, ideology, and recruitment, furthering a spiral of violence.

Recent violent events against insurgents' relatives also reflect the growing tensions between insurgency and local populations. As an inadequate response to the terrorist actions, the Parliament of the KBR released a new initiative to place charges against insurgents' families. Also, an unknown group identifying themselves as an anti-wahhabi militia named the "Black Hawks" has threatened (and committed) violence against insurgents' relatives.

Instead of putting forward repressive policies, state authorities should engage in various programs to promote political participation and social integration among young people. They also have to create a channel for political opposition that offers a non-violent alternative to voice political and religious grievances.

The case of Kabardino-Balkaria suggests that if no political solution is put forward to counter insurgents' propaganda and recruitment, further destabilization of the republic could result and insurgency ideology could spill over to relatively non-radicalized republics like Adygea and Karachaevo-Cherkessia.