

Islam in Chechnya

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Following is a summary of a talk given on March 13, 1998 by BPS's Executive Director at the Berkeley-Stanford Conference, "Religion and Spirituality in Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union."

There is a long-standing debate in the literature on ethno-nationalism about whether the nation creates the state or the state creates the nation. On one side are scholars who argue that common ethnicity (usually defined as some combination of common language and shared culture) leads, in the modern era at least, to a sense of political community, which leads in turn to political aspirations for statehood and then, in many cases, to statehood itself. The alternative view is that more often the state *precedes* the nation and a shared perception of belonging to a common political community. Rather than the nation creating the state, it is the modern state that makes the nation—in Eugene Weber's famous formulation about France, the state makes "peasants into Frenchmen" as it expands territorially, assimilates minority cultures, and embraces nationalism as a mobilizing ideology.

A similar debate is possible about the relationship between religion and the state in the former Soviet Union generally, and in particular about the relationship between the state and politicized Islam. Are previously existing and deeply-rooted religious beliefs responsible in part for the emergence of national identities, or are new states and political circumstances responsible for the emergence of new commitments to religion, commitments that were in fact weak or even nonexistent in the Soviet period?

Given the growing concern in Moscow and other capitals of the successor states about religious revival and politicized Islam in the Caucasus, Central Asia, and even Tatarstan and Bashkortostan, this question may have important political implications. On the one hand, if the Islamic revival is truly a revival—an awakening of traditional beliefs, practices, and institutions that were repressed in the Soviet period—then one might expect that the traditional conservatism and political moderation of the Islam practiced in most of these regions will prevail in the successor states. If, on the other hand, the turn to Islam is essentially a political phenomenon rooted not so much in the past but in the insecurities and traumas of today, then it is more likely that the Islamic revival will itself be politicized, fundamentalist, anti-Russian, and probably anti-Western in orientation.

While the situation is significantly different between countries and regions in the former Soviet Union, in Chechnya at least the turn to Islam seems to be driven primarily by political factors. That Islam is experiencing a revival as well as a transformation in postwar Chechnya is clear. Last year, the Chechen government announced a ban on alcohol sales and introduced Islamic law—*sharia*—and established *sharia* courts in the republic. Grozny also carried two public executions of people convicted under *sharia* law, one of which was televised. While on a trip to Turkey, Chechen President Maskhadov announced that he would transform the republic formally into an Islamic state, renaming it "The Islamic Republic of Ichkeria." Thus Chechen government is the only government in the former Soviet space to have officially embraced Islam as a state religion.

On the face of it, Maskhadov is an unlikely candidate to turn Chechnya into an Islamic republic. He is a former Soviet army colonel (he was a Chief of Rocket and Artillery Forces in Lithuania who returned to Chechnya in 1992 at the request of Dzhokhar Dudaev, the late Chechen president), and like most military officers prior to the Soviet collapse he appears to have been relatively Sovietized. To my knowledge, there is no evidence that he was a devout Muslim prior to the war, let alone an Islamic fundamentalist, which would have been very difficult to reconcile with being a member of the Soviet armed forces, particularly given the Soviet military's involvement in Afghanistan. In the context of Chechen politics, Maskhadov is a moderate who in the presidential elections at the beginning of 1997 handily defeated a number of candidates, including the then acting president and former vice president under Dudaev, Zelimkhan Yandarbiev, who were considerably more radical in their support for Islam as well as in their opposition to any kind of compromise with Russia.

Nor does Chechnya's turn to Islam appear to result from the intensity of traditional Chechen commitment to Islamic beliefs and practices. If anything, the evidence suggests that Islam was less well entrenched in Chechnya prior to the war in 1993-96 than it was in many other parts of the former Soviet Union. Chechnya, unlike Bukhara or the Middle Volga region of Russia, and to a lesser extent Daghestan as well, was not known as a center of traditional Islamic learning. In the Soviet period, the Muslim religious board of the North Caucasus was in Makhachkala, the capital of Daghestan, not in Grozny. Indeed, Islam came rather late to the North Caucasus, and later to Chechnya than to Daghestan. It spread gradually from the southeastern North Caucasus into the northwest, and arrived in Chechnya in the late eighteenth century, much later than it did in Azerbaijan, Central Asia, or Tatarstan. The Chechen language, on the other hand, is one of the oldest languages on earth—linguists date its origins to some four to six thousand years ago. Accordingly, Chechen culture and some form of common Chechen identity predated Islam by many centuries, conceivably even millennia. This was not true, for example, of the Azeris, for whom a key marker of their ethnic distinctiveness was the fact that they were Turkic-speaking Shi'a Muslims.

Moreover, when it arrived in Chechnya, Islam mixed with traditional religious beliefs and practices, which may help explain why the brand of Islam adopted by the Chechens for the most part was Sufism—a mystical form of Sunni Islam that involves the "journeying" of a disciple (the *murid*) under the tutelage of an adept toward God and that in part rejects *sharia* law in favor of customary law (*adat*). In this respect, Sufism was particularly amenable to the Chechen's traditional highlander culture, with its village-based individualism, egalitarianism, traditional practices, respect for elders, and opposition to hierarchy.

Islam, however, was only one part of the multifaceted self-definition of the Chechen people. Prior to the 1917 Revolution, the Chechens, like most peoples, had multiple political identities, and the salience of those identities was at least partly situational—that is, a particular identity would be activated by particular events and situations—most dramatically, of course, by war. One of these multiple identities was being a Sufi Muslim, but others included being North Caucasian, a member of the Chechen-Ingush linguistic family and cultural community, a Chechen (which essentially meant being a Chechen-speaker), a member of a particular *teip* or clan based on blood ties (there are some 150 *teipy* today, twenty of which are particularly old and prestigious), a member of a particular Sufi order (the so-called *tariqats*, of which there are two main ones in Chechnya today, the Naqshbandiias and the Qadirriias), a highlander or lowlander, an urban or rural dweller, and finally, and doubtless most importantly most of the time, a member of a particular village and particular family. Additional identities were then added or strengthened after the Revolution, including those of being a member of a particular class (worker, intelligent, peasant, etc.) and of being a Soviet citizen. Certainly some Chechens, particularly those in urban areas, lowlanders, those with higher education, and those who were engaged in certain kinds of professions such as the military, became more Sovietized than others. The weakest identity, given the political irrelevance of the institutions of the RSFSR, was that of being a citizen of the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic.

Being a Muslim, in short, was only one of many alternative identities for Chechens during the Soviet period. It was also an identity that was deliberately undermined by the Soviet state—substantially more so than other aspects of traditional Chechen beliefs and practices. Beginning in the 1920s and intensifying in the 1930s, Soviet authorities launched a systematic assault on organized religion generally and on Islam particularly. While the intensity of this pressure abated after the war, and while the assault clearly failed to wipe out Islamic beliefs among Chechens and other Muslims entirely, it is my impression that it was rather successful in undermining religious faith, particularly among those living in cities. This appears to have been as true for Chechens as for other Muslims in the USSR (Chechens did, however, remain substantially more rural than the Soviet population as a whole—according to the 1989 census, 27 percent of Chechens lived in cities, which probably meant that they were able to maintain their religious beliefs and practices more than other nationalities). Moreover, I am not aware of any evidence that Chechens were particularly devout among the Muslims of the former Soviet Union; by all accounts, most Chechen men drank alcohol, smoked cigarettes, ate pork, and so on, while Chechen women did not cover their faces and participated in the labor force.

This is not to say that the Chechen's Muslim identity was unimportant or absent in the Soviet period. Rather, being a Muslim was but one of many components of the very strong sense of ethnic identity of the Chechen people. Chechens had very high rates of native language retention (98.1 percent in 1989, compared for example to a rate of 87.0 percent for Ossetians), and Chechens clearly had a strong sense of being a distinct people different not only

from Russians and other Slavs but also from the other traditionally Muslim peoples of the North Caucasus, the only partial exception being their close linguistic cousins, the Ingush.

For that matter, although this flies in the face of much conventional wisdom, it is not clear that the Chechens were radically anti-Soviet in the pre-*perestroika* era. Moscow officials seemed to have *feared* that the Chechens were more anti-Soviet than other nationalities, as suggested by the fact that the first communist party first secretary of the Chechen-Ingush ASSR (Chechnya and Ingushetia did not formally split until early 1992) who was an ethnic Chechen, Doku Zavgayev, was appointed in the Gorbachev era. But many Chechens fought hard and very effectively for the USSR during World War II, and there is no evidence, Stalin's charges notwithstanding, that they collaborated with the Germans any more than did other nationalities residing in areas occupied by the Wehrmacht (the Germans actually occupied only a small part of Chechnya in 1942). It is also doubtless true that the anti-Soviet sentiments of the Chechens were deepened by their deportation in 1944, when the entire nation was sent into internal exile and a great many Chechens died as a result. And certainly Chechen national myths of resistance to outside oppression remained a central theme in their self-identity. But the Chechens were not the only deported people in the Stalin period, and their demands in the pre-*perestroika* era appear to have been similar to those of other nationalities. Nor is there any evidence that resentment at their treatment by Moscow was particularly colored by their religious identity or by the belief that they were targeted simply because they were Muslims.

In fact, during most of the Gorbachev period Chechnya, like neighboring Dagestan, was generally thought to have had a conservative and pro-Communist leadership and to have been a rather conservative pro-Communist place that was effectively under the control of Zavgayev and the local party apparatus. Indeed, the Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Republic was late to declare sovereignty—it did so only on November 26, 1990, later than most other autonomous republics in the RSFSR. Although turnout was low (58.8 percent), its electorate also voted overwhelmingly for the preservation of the USSR in Gorbachev's March 1991 referendum (75.9 percent). The republic then voted decisively in favor of Yeltsin (76.7 percent) in June 1991, and it was generally assumed in Moscow at the time that the reason was that Yeltsin, who had visited Grozny earlier that year, had struck some kind of deal with Zavgayev and that Zavgayev was able to turn out the electorate in support of Yeltsin.

As this suggests, the turn toward radical nationalism in the republic came quite suddenly, after the August 1991 coup, when Dzhokhar Dudaev and his allies managed to throw out Zavgayev and the traditional nomenklatura leadership. Zavgayev's ouster came as a surprise to many in Moscow, but despite Zavgayev's apparent support for Yeltsin during the June 1991 presidential elections, his failure to oppose the putschists during the coup led Yeltsin's allies to welcome, at least initially, his ouster. It was only after the radical character of Dudaev's program, which provided for the independence of Chechnya from Russia, that Yeltsin's "team" began to express its concern about what was happening in the republic. These concerns intensified after Dudaev was elected president in very hastily arranged and rather suspect elections in late October 1991, at which point he promptly declared independence.

It is worth noting that the Chechen vote for Dudaev (official returns had him receiving 90.1 percent of the vote) is not dispositive about Chechen preferences for full independence or even separation from Russia, let alone for the establishment of an Islamic state. All the union republics except Kazakhstan and the RSFSR had already declared "independence" by then, but the majority were also still committed to the so-called "Novo-Ogarevo process" and the effort to reach agreement on some form of a new union. What "independence" actually meant was therefore unclear. Nor was it clear whether the Chechens were voting at the time primarily against Communism, against Soviet power, against Zavgayev, for Dudaev and his allies, or for independence. Indeed, I believe that it is very possible that most Chechens would have been willing to settle for something short of full legal independence but that the political elite on both sides failed to explore the possibilities. What the Chechens were clearly unwilling to accept, however, was the dispatch of Russian troops to their territory to restore central writ, which they viewed as a foreign invasion of their homeland. When Yeltsin declared a state of emergency in the republic after the declaration of independence in November 1991, it quickly became clear that the Chechens would resist the "invasion" by force of arms, at which point Yeltsin (wisely) ordered his interior ministry troops to withdraw. This led in turn to the standoff between Grozny and Moscow that was to last until the full-scale Russian invasion at the end of 1994.

Again, it is worth emphasizing that Dudaev, like Maskhadov after him, was a relatively Sovietized Chechen. He had risen through the ranks of the Soviet Air Force as a pilot and had served loyally in Afghanistan as leader of a bomber wing, apparently unconcerned by orders to bomb the villages of Afghan Muslims. He was also one of the very few Chechens who attained the rank of general in the Soviet military, his last position being commander of a

division of Soviet strategic bombers in Estonia from 1988-91, and he was reportedly very proud of having been an officer of the Soviet military. He was married to an ethnic Russian, lived only very briefly in Chechnya as a boy (he spent most of his youth in Kazakhstan), and spoke Chechen poorly. There is therefore no reason to believe that prior to 1990 he was deeply anti-Soviet or a devout Muslim, or even a closet Chechen nationalist—indeed, the story at the time was that he was asked to become a leader of the fledgling Chechen nationalist movement in late 1990 as a compromise candidate who was not closely associated with a particular clan or influential *tariqat*. And finally, Dudaev himself quickly became very unpopular in Chechnya, despite or perhaps because of his erratic behavior and provocative anti-Russian stance. For all these reasons, then, initial popular support for Dudaev does not suggest irresolute opposition among Chechens to any kind of status within the Russian federation, let alone support for radical and politicized Islam.

At least until the early months of the war itself, the conventional wisdom was that Islam had very little to do either with the standoff between Moscow and Chechnya between late 1991 and late 1994 or with the fierce Chechen resistance to Russian occupation after the invasion in December 1994. Indeed, the Chechen constitution adopted under Dudaev (which admittedly had a Potemkin village-like quality to it) was decidedly liberal in substance. It established a secular democratic state and provided for freedom of religion and expression, apparently in part because Dudaev hoped for, and expected, support for Chechen "self-determination" from the West. Dudaev's secularism began to change only after it became clear that the West would not support Chechen demands for independence, at which point he began to look to the Islamic world for support. At one point, he visited Iran and called for a *jihad* against Moscow (which did little to endear him to Yeltsin, or to Western leaders, for that matter). Still, my impression at the time was that this was a purely instrumental move by Dudaev. Indeed, he reportedly gave a press conference at the time in which he made the mistake of saying that good Muslims were required to pray four, rather than five, times every day, a mistake he shrugged off by saying that five times was even better than four. Nor did it seem that Dudaev's appeals to Islam were resonating with the Chechen people at the time.

Thus it was only *after* the war broke out that Islam began to become an important theme for the Chechen resistance movement. Chechen resistance fighters, the *boeviki*, drew inspiration from the Afghan *mujahadin* and their struggle against the Soviet military, and they began to wear green armbands and headbands. Dudaev and the Chechen field commanders also began to adopt more of the symbols of Islam. In part, this may have been because they wanted help from Islamic groups and countries abroad. But it was also because Islam provided such an effective ideology of resistance for the Chechens. Not only did the appeal to Islam draw on the cult of the *mujahadin*, but it taught that those who gave their lives for the cause were martyrs who would go straight to heaven. The war, in short, led to the politicization of Islam—politicized Islam did not lead to war.

Let me say a few words at this point about Wahhabism in Chechnya and the North Caucasus, a subject that has received a great deal of attention recently. Wahhabism is an Islamic puritan movement that emerged in the early eighteenth century and was adopted by the Saudi ruling family in 1744. It is fundamentalist in the true sense of the word, advocating a return to the original teachings of the Koran and Mohammed and opposing changes in Islamic doctrine. It is still the version of Islam embraced by the Saudi royal family and the Saudi state, and is now widespread not only on the Arabian peninsula but also increasingly in other areas, such as Pakistan.

In Russian and other Soviet successor states, however, the term "Wahhabism" tends to be used very loosely to refer to any kind of politicized Islam or non-sanctioned Islamic organization. This is particularly true for state officials alarmed by what they see as increasingly radical Islam. The extent of this concern was suggested recently by the Russian Minister of Justice: "We believe," he asserted, "that the greatest threat [to Russia] comes from Islamic fundamentalism, namely Wahhabism. It is a special form of political extremism similar to terrorism." These concerns were heightened after a recent attack on a Russian Interior Ministry post in the town of Buinakdk, in Daghestan, an attack that was reportedly carried out by forces loyal to Emil Khattab, a Jordanian citizen (his ethnicity is unclear, although he does not appear to be a Chechen) who was a commander of a resistance unit known as the Islamic Battalion during the war. According to alarmists in Moscow, Khattab is a Wahhabi who has set up Wahhabi guerilla training camps in Chechnya and Daghestan and is dedicated to the establishment of an Islamic state encompassing not only Chechnya but Daghestan, Ingushetia, and even the western part of the North Caucasus.

Available evidence suggests that there are indeed self-described Wahhabis in the North Caucasus but that Wahhabism is considerably less widespread than many in Moscow fear. Wahhabism began to establish a presence in the region after Soviet Muslims began to travel to Saudi Arabia for the *hadj* in the *perestroika* era. It seems unlikely,

however, that the Saudi government, which is extremely conservative and worries about terrorist threats of its own, is engaged in financing armed Wahhabi militants in the former Soviet Union. On the other hand, rich individuals from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, or elsewhere have been contributing funds for the construction of mosques, financing the *hadj*, and so on, and some of this money may also be going to militant Wahhabi groups with decidedly political agendas, which may account for the claims coming out of Moscow about external efforts to promote instability in Russia's ethnic republics.

In the North Caucasus (and indeed in most other parts of the former Soviet Union), Wahhabism is opposed not only by the traditional clergy, which tends to see the Wahhabis as a threat to their influence and position, but also by the political elite. This is true in Daghestan, for example, where the political elite is trying to keep a lid on the delicate ethnic balance in the republic and is worried that militant Wahhabis with support from Chechen militants will make claims on Daghestani territory.

In Chechnya, Maskhadov has clearly expressed his opposition to Wahhabism and is trying to paint Wahhabi sympathizers in the republic as Arab sympathizers who are introducing a militant and fundamentalist brand of Arab Islam into the republic that is alien to the traditional "Turkish" orientation and moderate Islamic practices of the Chechen people. Wahhabis also have to contend with the traditional Sufi loyalties of the Chechen people. To the extent that Wahhabism actually is finding a significant base of social support in the North Caucasus, it is likely to be among militant youths who have no employment opportunities, were members of militia units to which they remain loyal and that provided—and continue to provide—they with security and a sense of belonging to a community, and who have little to do other than continue the armed struggle against some enemy, whether it be the Russians, the traditional religious elite, political moderates, or occupiers of traditionally Chechen lands in Daghestan.

More generally, it does not appear that there has been a great turn to Islam, particularly to fundamentalist Islam, among the Chechen population at large. As suggested earlier, the extent to which Chechens prefer secularism and internal order to radical Islam was suggested by the victory of the more moderate and secular Maskhadov over his more radical "Islamic" opponents in the presidential elections of January 1997. Most Chechens with whom I have spoken are adamant that the great majority of Chechens are not sympathetic to "Arab" fundamentalism.

If so, then why has Maskhadov called for the establishment of an Islamic state in Chechnya? The answer, I believe, lies in the anarchic situation in the republic and the extent to which the Chechen political elite is increasingly polarized. Not only is Chechnya physically devastated, but Maskhadov faces powerful opposition from the eighteen or so field commanders who operated very autonomously during the war, now control their own militias, and do not feel answerable to the Chechen president. Their opposition to Maskhadov intensified after the Chechen president decided to sign a "no use of force treaty" with Yeltsin in May of last year. At the same time, the republic has a heavily armed population, extraordinarily high unemployment, and suffers from endemic kidnappings. Finally, the multiple potential identities of most Chechens and cleavage lines within Chechen society still exist—Chechen, Muslim, North Caucasian, member of a *teip*, member of a village or town, member of a *tariqat*, member of a particular family, and so on. All of these factors are combining to make it enormously difficult for Maskhadov to establish state authority in the republic.

Thus Maskhadov faces a huge state building challenge in the face of significant political opposition. He therefore desperately needs some kind of ideological platform to help him restore order. But communism is dead, and western liberal democracy has been discredited by the refusal of the West to help Chechnya during the war. Moreover, liberal-democracy and capitalism are also said by many Chechens to be alien to Chechen traditions and have been deeply tainted in the minds of Chechens by their embrace (at least formally) by Russia. What is left is Islam—anti-Western, anti-Russian, and yet reasonably compatible with Chechen traditions. However, by embracing Islam Maskhadov is co-opting the platform of his most serious political rivals—Zelimkhan Yandarbiev, Salman Raduev, Movladi Udugov, and (increasingly) Shamil Basaev, some of whom (particularly Raduev and Udugov) have indicated considerable sympathy for Wahhabism, which as I mentioned earlier is both traditionally alien to the Chechens and likely to be rejected by those Chechens who resent the foreign ties of the Wahhabis, who wish to see a measure of order restored inside the republic, and who do not want to get involved in another war, this time in Daghestan. In short, *sharia* law provides a mechanism for bringing order to the streets and for enlisting the support of village elders for the authorities in Grozny.

Thus Maskhadov has apparently concluded that embracing Islam as a state ideology will help reestablish order while allowing him to outflank his rivals. He is not responding to a great upsurge in demand for politicized Islam from below. In this sense, borrowing from Ron Suny and his critique of the "Sleeping Beauty theory" of ethno-nationalism, it does not appear that a "Sleeping Beauty" theory of religious revival is borne out in the Chechen case. There is no evidence that politicized radical Islam was an "essentialist" or "primordial" component of Chechen national identity that was repressed by the Soviet state and then reawakened by the collapse of the Soviet state. On the contrary, politicized Islam is very much a political phenomenon rooted above all in the need to reestablish state authority in a devastated republic that feels abandoned by, and alienated from, the West.

This article originally appeared in the Fall 1998 issue (Issue 6) of the *Contemporary Caucasus Newsletter*, published by the Berkeley Program in Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies at UC Berkeley.