



ON THE PERIPHERY OF GLOBAL JIHAD

THE NORTH CAUCASUS:
THE ILLUSION OF STABILISATION

Maciej Falkowski

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THESES

- Very few reports on military incidents and attacks in the North Caucasus have been published in Russian and global media over the past few months. Compared to preceding years, when accounts on clashes and numerous victims in the region were on the news almost every day, a situation like this has not been seen in the two-decades-long history of the modern Caucasian wars (the First Chechen War broke out twenty years ago, in December 1994, and the North Caucasus started making the headlines in newspapers worldwide).
- The intensity and frequency of the conflict in the Russian Caucasus is clearly decreasing. Its nature has changed, as well. As a rule, the active side is constituted by law enforcement agencies carrying out raids on the mujahideen, who are unable to organise themselves into any large-scale military activity. The death count, which is falling every year, is further proof that this conflict is becoming less intense. The situation in Chechnya, which was the main source of instability in the region for years, is especially symptomatic. At present, it is one of the most peaceful republics in the North Caucasus.
- The main reasons for the partial stabilisation of the situation in the region include ideological changes in the militants' camp and the related organisational crisis observed in the Islamic military underground known as the 'Caucasus Emirate'. Since the idea of Chechen nationalism and separatism was replaced with jihad, the military struggle in the Caucasus has been diluted ideologically in global jihad, has lost its uniqueness and has been marginalised since top priority is now reserved for the Syrian and Iraqi fronts. The direct effects of this transformation include a redirection of Caucasian recruits to the Middle East and a mass influx of former and active militants to Syria, where hundreds-strong Caucasian (mainly Chechen) military groups have been formed. Furthermore,

the militants' aggressive Salafi ideology has made them alienated from the residents of the Caucasus, for whom ethnic identity and Sufism, which Salafis believe to be heresy, are still important¹. Other reasons for the organisational crisis within the Caucasus Emirate include the lack of experienced leaders, the low level of esteem for the new emir, Aliaskhab Kebekov, and the devastating consequences of the long-lasting military conflict.

- The stabilisation is also to a great extent a result of Moscow's Chechenisation policy, as part of which Akhmad Kadyrov and later his son, Ramzan, were given internal independence and guarantees of high subsidies in exchange for stabilising the situation using any means possible. The successful compilation of political moves (winning over militants), bloody terror, genuine economic reconstruction of the republic and building on Chechen nationalism and Sufism as the ideological base opposed to Islamic fundamentalism (Wahhabism) have led to the degradation of Chechen guerrilla forces and stabilisation of the situation in Chechnya. The 'carrot and stick' tactic employed by Moscow with regard to the Caucasian republics has also produced some repercussions. The short-term effects are a consequence of the unprecedented repression used prior to the Sochi Olympics, while the long-term effects have been achieved through adopting a milder policy with regard to peaceable Salafis, mainly in Dagestan and Ingushetia in 2011-2013.
- The calmer situation recently observed in the Caucasus is to a great extent an illusion, being a result of the tendency to view security in the Caucasus through the prism of the activity of the armed Islamic underground and at the same time to disregard other destabilising factors (ethnic conflicts, clan rivalries, etc.). Furthermore, the partial stabilisation is unstable,

¹ The notions of Salafism and Sufism are explained in the frame 'Salafism and Sufism in the North Caucasus'.

a contingent outcome of the situation rather the result of systemic change. The situation has stabilised because short-term favourable (from the Russian point of view) factors have come into existence (for example, unprecedented special operations were held before the Sochi Olympics), while the region's pressing problems remain unresolved; and these problems generate chronic instability and cause the Caucasus to drift away from Russia in civilisational terms with increasing speed.

- An economic or political crisis in the Russian Federation may result in unfreezing the conflicts in the Caucasus, including a reactivation of the idea of Chechen independence, the foundations for which are being laid now by Kadyrov (this is the price the Kremlin is paying for peace in Chechnya), and the idea of the Caucasus Emirate, which is a part of global jihad. In the short term, a reduction of subsidies to the Caucasian republics from the federal budget could give rise to conflicts; and this reduction is possible, given the deteriorating economic situation in the Russian Federation and the significant costs of the process of integration of Crimea following its annexation by Russia. Furthermore, the stability in Chechnya is ephemeral because it is not based on social consensus but on Ramzan Kadyrov's dictatorial rule and the unwritten agreement between him and President Vladimir Putin.

I. NO NEWS FEED OR GENUINE STABILISATION?

The Caucasus has ‘calmed down’ over recent months – news from the region is no longer hitting the headlines². One important reason why news from the Caucasus is given less attention in the media is the fact that the Russian information space has been dominated by the recent developments in Ukraine. On the one hand, this is done in response to market demand (genuine interest in what is happening in Ukraine) and, on the other hand, this is part of Russian propaganda, which is now focused on Ukraine. The image of the enemy, which is constantly present in the Russian media, has also been transformed. The enemy is no longer the ‘Caucasian terrorist’ or the ‘immigrant depriving Russians of work’ – now the enemy is the ‘Banderite’ and the ‘American imperialist’ who supports him.

Western journalists’ disinterest in the North Caucasus can also partly be viewed as a ‘Sochi effect’. Before the Olympics, the media were speculating about the threat the proximity of the war-ridden Caucasian republics posed to the Olympics, and numerous foreign journalists visited Dagestan, Kabardino-Balkaria and other regions. Since the Olympics were not disturbed by any incident, interest in the Caucasus has naturally waned.

Security in the region is evaluated through the prism of the activities of the Islamic military underground (and previously of Chechen separatism): if the rebels are not active, it means that the situation is stable. This picture is false to a great extent, since it fails to take into account the significantly less spectacular manifestations of instability (ethnic conflicts, conflicts over land, relentless rivalry between the clans, conflicts inside Islam, organised crime, abuse of authority by the law enforcement agencies,

² Non-Russian media have no independent sources of information in the North Caucasus. They use Russian media reports. Internet portals of Caucasian Islamic militants are an exception. But they do not adhere to any journalistic standards, and most of the information they publish is propaganda.

etc.), which are nonetheless important destabilising factors³. Furthermore, the Caucasus is unstable because its economy is not functioning. This region is less an integral part of the Russian Federation but is more like a Russian colony, where the relative peace and order results from subsidies from the federal budget, military strength and the rule of local clans backed by the Kremlin, whose authority is based on nepotism and corruption.

However, the impression of partial stabilisation in the Caucasus is not merely a product of the aforementioned factors. Jihad is genuinely dying down in the Caucasus, proofs of which include not only the official Russian statistics but also information provided by militants themselves, who, for example, openly admit that they are short of recruits, money and public support. Military actions initiated by the rebels are less and less frequent. Their nature is also changing. Whereas several years ago the guerrillas plotted spectacular military actions (for example, the offensive on Nazran in 2004 or Nalchik in 2005) and terrorist attacks, at present they are only able to operate on a much smaller scale (individual killings of representatives of law enforcement agencies and lower-ranking state officials, leaders of Sufi fraternities and official clergymen, attacks on shops selling alcohol and brothels, murdering fortune-tellers and extorting money from entrepreneurs). Furthermore, militants' success in imposing the 'jihad tax' on businessmen has encouraged criminal groups and representatives of law enforcement agencies to act in a similar way (forcing them to accept paid protection against the militants or pretending to be them). Therefore, it is often difficult to state beyond any doubt whether a given action has really been carried out by the rebels. In addition to this, a new custom has been observed in Dagestan: individual politicians hire or form their own militant squads to

³ For more on these issues see: Wojciech Górecki, 'No change in the Russian Caucasus. The winter Olympics amid a local war', *OSW Studies*, 2013; <http://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-studies/2014-01-27/no-change-russian-caucasus-winter-olympics-amid-a-local-war>

help them fight against their political and business competitors. Militants also stage ‘contract’ attacks⁴.

The military underground’s potential is lessening, evidence of which includes the fact that no major terrorist attacks have been launched over the past few years (one exception being the attacks in Volgograd, which were probably staged not upon instruction from the leaders of the Caucasus Emirate but by a local group from Buynaksk in Dagestan), the inability to fulfil the threats that the Sochi Olympics would be prevented issued by the previous leader of the Caucasus Emirate, Dokka Umarov (2006–2013), and the fact that most of the clashes are not initiated by the militants but by Russian law enforcement agencies who decimate them as part of special operations.

Another proof of partial stabilisation in the Caucasus is from the statistics showing the death toll of the conflict. The most reliable and complete statistics are provided by the Russian portal *Caucasian Knot* which specialises in Caucasian issues and is supervised by the Memorial organisation. As regards the death count (Table no. 1), a downward trend has been observed since 2011, when a total of 750 people were killed as a consequence of military activity, attacks, murders committed by law enforcement agencies, etc. Three years later, the death toll was around 30% lower. If the tendency seen since the beginning of this year continues (and it will be so by all appearances) the death toll this year will be half the number in 2013. It also needs to be emphasised that the methodology used by *Caucasian Knot* is quite schematic, and thus the death toll of the military conflict is overestimated. The portal includes in the statistics all deaths resulting from shooting, attacks, etc., without discriminating whether these came from conflicts with Islamic rebels or, for example, mafia, clan or family feuds.

⁴ In contrast to Chechnya, Dagestanian policy is characterised by pluralism, which is inherent in the brutal rivalry between individual politicians and ethnic and criminal clans.

Table 1. The death toll of the conflict in the North Caucasus (2010-2014)

Year	2010	2011	2012	2013	first half of 2014
Death toll	749	750	700	529	181

A clear downward trend (from 225 victims in 2010 to only 21 in the first half of 2014) can also be seen in the statistics showing the death toll among the representatives of the law enforcement agencies and – what is especially important when evaluating the stability of the situation – civilians. As many as 349 civilians were killed in 2010, yet only 19 in the first half of 2014. The number of militants killed has remained at more or less the same level, which is evidence of the success of antiterrorist operations, the severity of the law enforcement agencies, who take no prisoners, and the militants’ weakness and lack of experience.

Table 2. Death toll broken down by categories

Year	2010	2011	2012	2013	first half of 2014
Law enforcement agencies	225	190	209	127	21
Militants	349	384	404	298	141
Civilians	175	176	87	104	19

As regards the situation in each of the Northern Caucasian republics, Dagestan is the unquestionable leader in instability rankings (378 victims in 2010 and 341 in 2013). However, it should be noted that this is the most populous of the Northern Caucasian republics, with a population of around three million (for comparison, around one million people live in Chechnya, around 400,000 in

Ingushetia and around 850,000 in Kabardino-Balkaria). Furthermore, a significant proportion of the victims in the traditionally restless Dagestan (attacks, political murders, criminal feuds, etc. have been commonplace there since the early 1990s) were not killed in battles between the law enforcement agencies and the militants. In turn, the most noticeable stabilisation has been seen in Chechnya (the death toll fell from 127 in 2010 to 39 in 2013) and in Ingushetia (from 134 to 36 within the same timeframe).

Table 3. Death toll by republics

Year	2010	2013	first half of 2014
Dagestan	378	341	120
Chechnya	127	39	9
Ingushetia	134	36	12
Northern Ossetia	24	3	0
Kabardino-Balkaria	79	92	25
Karachay-Cherkessia	2	5	0
Stavropol Krai	10	13	18

II. THE GLOBALISATION OF CAUCASIAN JIHAD

One of the reasons for the stabilisation observed in the Caucasus is the ideological, identity and organisational crisis in the military underground who have branded themselves as the Caucasus Emirate (see the frame below), the establishment of which is the main goal of the militants' struggle. In ideological terms, the Caucasus Emirate, which evolved during the Chechen Wars from Chechen separatism⁵ over the past few years has in fact been subsumed into global jihad. Even a quick look at the numerous Caucasian Islamic radicals' portals, the discussions within these circles or recordings and statements of both militant commanders and leaders of the local Islamic fundamentalists reveals not only their enormous interest in the developments across the entire Islamic world but even their identification with the global *umma* and jihad being fought in different parts of the globe (above all in the Middle East)⁶. While previously 'Caucasianness' was the most important notion for the military underground in the Caucasus (with strong solidarity with the Islamic world), the most essential element of its present ideology is 'Islamicness'. They are thus fighting not so much and not only for the establishment of an Islamic state in the Caucasus, but rather for the global victory of jihad, whose aim is to establish a caliphate in the lands inhabited by Muslims. Consequently, the term 'Islamic mujahideen in the Caucasus' characterises them more accurately than the term 'Caucasian Islamic militants'. Thus in ideological terms (albeit not in operational ones), the Caucasus Emirate has undergone

⁵ For more on the process of the evolution of the militants' ideology from Chechen separatism to Caucasian jihad see: Maciej Falkowski, 'Chechnya: between a Caucasian jihad and 'hidden' separatism', *OSW Point of View*, 2007; <http://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/policy-briefs/2007-01-15/chechnya-between-a-caucasian-jihad-and-hidden-separatism>

⁶ One example could be the heated discussions among Muslim radicals and inside Caucasus Emirate on whether it is reasonable to go on jihad in Syria and which of the jihadist groupings should be supported. A similar discussion was seen after the proclamation of the caliphate by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) in July 2014.

a transformation from a local military organisation to a branch of the global jihadist movement.

Caucasus Emirate

The Caucasus Emirate (in the militants' terminology, *Imarat Kavkaz*) was proclaimed in 2007 by the then 'president' of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria (ChRI), Dokka Umarov, later known as the 'emir of the Caucasus'. The presidents of the ChRI before him were: Dzhokhar Dudayev (1991-1996), Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev (1996-1997), Aslan Maskhadov (1997-2004) and Abdul Halim Sadulayev (2004-2006). The setting up of the Caucasus Emirate - which meant liquidation of the ChRI - was a logical consequence of the process of ideological evolution of the military underground in Chechnya: from Chechen separatism to pan-Caucasian jihad.

According to the militants' propaganda, the emirate is an Islamic state extending over the entire North Caucasus and it is occupied by Russia. It is divided into *vilayats* (provinces): Dagestan, Chechnya, Ingushetia, Kabarda-Balkaria-Karachay, Circassia and the Nogai Steppe. In reality, it is a virtual superstructure which ideologically unites the Islamic military underground operating in the Caucasus. Although it aspires to be an underground state (which the ChRI was to a certain extent), with its own administration, courts, tax collection, etc., it is an inept imitation (the administration is formed by military unit commanders, the 'jurisdiction' of the underground Sharia courts is limited to the militants themselves and is disregarded by the general public, and the collection of 'jihad taxes' boils down to extorting money from entrepreneurs.) It is even difficult to classify the emirate as a terrorist organisation *sensu stricto*, since it is a network. The local armed groups formed by between more than ten and several dozen militants, operating under the label of the emirate and formally recognising the emir as their leader (since March 2014, he is Aliaskhab

Kebekov alias Ali Abu Muhammad), contact each other on very rare occasions, if at all, and are engaged in uncoordinated and dispersed activities. A small section of the militants form guerilla troops which have bases in the mountains, while most of them live in the cities or villages, and from time to time join military actions, attacks, etc. In total, probably not more than 1,000 militants are active (take part in operations) in the Caucasus as a whole, most of them in Dagestan.

Paradoxically, the evolution of Caucasus Emirate's ideology and identity has resulted in the weakening of the military underground in the Caucasus. The ideological dilution of the military struggle in global jihad has deprived it of its uniqueness and marginalised it, considering the priority given to the Syrian and Iraqi fronts. The peripheral nature of Caucasian jihad coupled with the lack of military successes and chances of success has made it less appealing not only to potential volunteers from the Islamic world (none of them are present in the Caucasus now), but also to local recruits and even active militants. In effect, the number of volunteers wishing to join guerrilla troops in the Caucasus (mainly in Chechnya) has reduced significantly, and their influx has been re-directed to the Middle East, above all to Syria (in the case of many of them, their departure was preceded by being a refugee in Europe). Furthermore, active fighters, including some commanders (e.g. Tarkhan Gaziyeu) have started leaving the Caucasus for Syria. Dagestanians and Chechens predominate among those leaving for the Middle East.

The fact that Caucasian radicals have physically joined the global jihad sets a precedent in the history of modern Caucasian wars. Never before have they participated on a mass scale in jihad outside the Caucasus (except for some individual cases in Afghanistan). The most widely publicised and the most spectacular actions held by Caucasian militants have been recently seen not in Grozny or the mountains of Dagestan, but near Aleppo and Kobane in Syria or Mosul in Iraq, where several armed groupings

formed by Caucasian émigrés are active. The peripheral nature of the Caucasian front and the priority granted to Syria and Iraq also mean that the Caucasus Emirate may not count on financial support from the circles which back jihad in the Muslim world.

Caucasian militants in the Middle East

It is estimated that between 1,000 and 3,000 militants of Caucasian origin (the North Caucasus, Azerbaijan and the Pankisi Gorge in Georgia) may be active in Syria and – to a lesser extent – in Iraq. Most of them are Dagestanis and Chechens. Initially, those who joined jihadist troops in Syria were Caucasian students attending Islamic schools in the Middle East and Chechen refugees living in Turkey. Another wave was formed by Chechen refugees living in Europe (according to various estimates, between 150,000 and 250,000 Chechens live in EU member states) – both experienced militants and new recruits. The influx of ‘European’ volunteers has been reduced over the past few months since they now find it more difficult to leave Europe as a result of closer co-operation between European and Turkish secret services. In turn, since the position of the commander, Omar al-Shishani (*shishani* in Arabic means ‘Chechen’), has become stronger within Islamic State structures (one of the key commanders and aides of the self-proclaimed Caliph Ibrahim alias Abu-Bakr al-Baghdadi), the number of recruits arriving in Syria directly from the Caucasus via Turkey has increased (logistically, this is not a problem, given the existence of a visa-free regime between Russia and Turkey and numerous direct airline connections, including Grozny–Istanbul, Mineralnye Vody–Istanbul, Makhachkala–Istanbul, etc.).

A phenomenon that would require a separate discussion is the mass influx to Syria of ethnic Chechens living in the Pankisi Gorge in Georgia (only several thousand Chechens live there). It is estimated that as many as 200 of them have arrived in

Syria. The numerous participation of representatives of this small community in the jihad probably stems from changes in conceptions of identity, above all Islamisation of the local youth under the influence of refugees from Chechnya and militants who were hiding in the gorge during the Second Chechen War, as well as vast unemployment and frustration among young people there.

The most important elements of Caucasian mujahideen fighting in the Middle East are:

- the groupings which report to Islamic State (former ISIS) and are led by an ethnic Chechen from Georgia, Omar al-Shishani (born Tarkhan Batirashvili); and a commander known by his nom de guerre Abu Jihad al-Shishani (an ethnic Karachay, his real name is not known);
- a group led by Salahuddin al-Shishani (his real name is unknown) which formally reports to Caucasus Emirate and is in conflict with the Omar al-Shishani's group; until recently, the group was named Army of Emigrants and Supporters (*Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar*); at present, after having teamed up with the mujahideen from other countries, it is known as *Jamaat Ahadun Ahad*);
- an independent group named Lions of Syria (*Jundu Sham*) led by Muslim Valid al-Shishani (Murad Margoshvili) who originates from Pankisi and who fought in Chechnya alongside Shamil Basayev and Khattab;
- the group of Tarkhan Gaziyeu – until recently, one of the key Chechen gureilla commanders – which is allied to the latter two.

In addition to those mentioned above, a few more smaller independent groups led by Chechens are engaged in the fighting in Syria, mainly near Aleppo.

The 'globalisation' of Caucasian jihad has alienated the military underground from the local Caucasian communities. Although these communities identify with the Muslim world, their local Caucasian and Chechen, Ingush, Avar, etc. identity is still much more important to them. Even though Salafi ideas are gaining popularity among young people in the Caucasus (Salafism has even become the dominant ideology in Dagestan), most residents of the region still perceive themselves as Chechen/Dagestani/Ingush etc. Muslims, and not - unlike the militants - as Muslims from the Caucasus. Furthermore, the Caucasian communities (with the exception of Salafis, who account for just a few percent of the population) do not accept the religious radicalism of the mujahideen, and above all, their sharp criticism of Sufism, which is deeply rooted in Dagestan, Chechnya and Ingushetia, and which from the Salafi point of view is heresy. This has a special meaning in Chechnya, where Sufism (mainly the Qadiriyya brotherhood) is one of the key elements of the Chechen national identity and where Islamisation of the socio-political life is not only rapidly developing but is also supported and sometimes even imposed by the government of the republic. Thus, the fundamentalists' propaganda is not convincing to most of the residents of this *de facto* Islamic, semi-independent Chechen republic. The activity of informants, which has become commonplace as a consequence of anti-terrorist operations, is also having its impact (militants may not count on support from the general public, apart from their relatives, residents of their villages and people who share their views, unlike the Chechen fighters during the First Chechen War).

Jihad has also lost momentum in the Caucasus alienated because the peaceful trend within Caucasian, and in particular Dagestani, Salafism has gained strength. The increasing popularity of Salafi ideas among young people thus does not necessarily translate into their support for jihad. Partly this is a consequence of the temporary loosening of the repression against peaceful Salafis in 2011-2013. This happened in connection with the dialogue initiated by the previous leader of Dagestan, Magomedislam Magomedov,

between Salafis (organised into the Association of Scholars Ahlu Sunna) and Sufi Islam (represented by the Spiritual Board of Muslims of Dagestan). Since it has become possible for Salafis to practice their faith (the operation of Salafi mosques, persecution for wearing ‘Salafi’ beards, etc. has stopped), some of them could have refrained from joining the militants. Another sign that the moderate trend has gained strength among Dagestanian Salafis is the fact that the grouping Hizb ut-Tahrir has become visible. This grouping has been almost absent from the North Caucasus until recently, while it has for years been very active, for example, in Central Asia and among Russian Muslims (mainly in the Volga Region). Although it has been recognised as a terrorist organisation in Russia, its aim is to rebuild the Islamic caliphate by peaceful means (and this organisation has genuinely stuck to this principle in the post-Soviet area).

Salafism and Sufism in the North Caucasus

Salafism – an Islamic religious movement of global nature. It focuses on the need for religious and moral revival in the spirit of ‘pure’ Islam, i.e. based solely and uncompromisingly on the Quran and the classical tradition (*sunnah* and *hadith*). It is a grassroots movement – it needs no organisation structures and has no uniform, consistent and binding socio-political agenda. However, Salafis are allowed to become engaged in various political and social activities, both legal and, for example, terrorist.

In the post-Soviet area, Salafism is frequently – and erroneously – identified with Wahhabism, which is understood not as the historic school of Quranic law and the political movement which had laid the foundations for modern Saudi Arabia, but as armed and terrorist movements drawing upon Islam, mainly in the Northern Caucasus (it is *de facto* a synonym of terrorism).

In the Caucasian context, Salafis can be divided into moderate and radical; the measure for this being their attitude to armed struggle. The moderate peaceful Salafis do not take part in the jihad, believing that – given the circumstances – its is not part of their religious obligations. In turn, the radical warring Salafis, want to fulfil their fundamentalist demands through armed struggle and the use of violence (the need for jihad). Thus the term ‘warring Salafis’ can be used with regard to the militants fighting under the banner of the Caucasus Emirate.

Sufism – a mystical trend within Islam, which is externally manifested through the operation of Sufi brotherhoods. This trend is deeply rooted in the Caucasus, and is viewed there as ‘traditional’ Islam as opposed to ‘non-traditional’ Salafism. In the 19th century, Sufism was the driving force for Islamic revival in the region, for ‘purifying’ Islam of non-canonical local influences and the ideological base for Caucasian insurgents fighting against Russia (Imam Shamil was a member of the Naqshbandiya brotherhood). Islam survived in the Caucasus in the Soviet times mainly owing to the operation of underground Sufi brotherhoods. When the USSR collapsed, the brotherhoods loyal to the state and supported by the governments, which were combating Salafis, gained power and in fact took control of official Islam in Dagestan, Chechnya and Ingushetia (the spiritual boards of Muslims, muftiyats). Being the government’s close ally and a serious political force, Sufism is fiercely combating Salafis, who in turn see Sufis as heretics who, for example, through their cult of Sufi leaders, sheikhs, violate the main pillar of Islam – monotheism (the unity and indivisibility of God).

III. THE CRISIS IN CAUCASUS EMIRATE

The problems resulting from the evolution of ideology and identity seen over the past few years in the military Islamic underground in the Caucasus are closely linked to the organisational crisis which the Caucasus Emirate has recently found itself in. Manifestations of this include the increasingly less frequent and effective military and terrorist actions, which have been limited to small local operations, the bulk of which have been plotted in Dagestan. In Chechnya, which until recently was the centre of Caucasian jihad, guerrilla warfare brings to mind the activity of the *abreks*, the legendary solitary warriors, who were hiding in the mountains long after the capitulation of Imam Shamil and the end of the 19th-century Caucasian War. In the other republics, these guerillas are amateurs acting locally or desperados seeking personal revenge, whose acts are often difficult to distinguish from criminal activity⁷.

The main reason behind the organisational crisis is the consequences of the long-lasting and devastating military conflict (it has continued unbroken since 1999). This conflict, along with the Chechenisation policy (this topic will be discussed in the next chapter), has led to the degradation of Chechen guerrillas, who had for many years been the vanguard of the military underground in the Caucasus, building their strength on the experience and foreign contacts of Chechen commanders and political leaders. This weakness is also a result of the shortage of experienced commanders (the sort of Aslan Maskhadov, Shamil Basayev or Ruslan Gelayev) and rank and file militants, who have died, emigrated to

⁷ Revenge for the death of loved ones or own humiliation (for example, while being arrested) is among the main motives for joining the guerrilla forces among the members of the Islamic underground in the Caucasus today. Even in the case of the present leader of the emirate, Ali Abu Muhammad (Aliaskhab Kebekov), personal revenge was the initial motivation for his joining the jihad (for the death of his uncle, the well-known Islamic scholar, Murtazali Magomedov, who was especially dear to Kebekov).

Syria or Europe or (in the case of Chechnya) have taken the side of Kadyrov. The militants are also short of new recruits, who have been unable to fill the gap left by their inexperienced predecessors who were decimated as part of special operations (most of them are killed on the spot during antiterrorist operations).

A serious blow to the Caucasus Emirate was the death of Dokka Umarov, who had led the militants from 2006 and had taken part in both Chechen Wars⁸. The very long interregnum, which lasted until spring 2014, may be evidence of a serious disagreement among the militants over who should be his successor and of probable disputes between Chechens, who were lobbying for the well-known commander Aslambek Vadalov, and the militants from the other republics. Finally, Aliaskhab Kebekov, native of Dagestan, who has no experience in combat and is lacking charisma, was elected as the new emir. His already weak position among both the militants in the Caucasus (one proof of which is, for example, the fact that Chechen guerrillas led by Aslan Batu-kaev are distancing themselves from the emir⁹) and the Chechens fighting in Syria has eroded further due to Kebekov's conciliatory views on jihad (in one of his first speeches he distanced himself from attacks on civilian targets and prohibited women's participation in suicide attacks).

The emir's esteem has suffered as a consequence of his inept interference in disputes between the groups of Caucasian militants in the Middle East as to which jihadist organisation operating there they should become allied with (he clearly supported Jabhat al-Nusra, an organisation linked to Al-Qaeda, and sharply criticised

⁸ He died in September 2013, probably as a result of poisoning.

⁹ The Chechen underground, which is part of the Caucasus Emirate, as part of its separate information policy runs www.checheninfo.com, a website uncontrolled by the emir. In turn, the fact that the Chechen language is more and more often used than Russian (unlike before) proves that Chechen militants have become focused on their own community. The Chechen leader also has his individual representative abroad.

ISIS and the Chechen troops led by it shortly before the proclamation of Islamic State and the caliphate). Kebekov and his supporters (including the people linked to the portal Kavkazcenter.com and the Caucasian mujahideen who are fighting in Syria as part of the *Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar* organisation) have been making efforts to salvage his position by, for example, publishing recordings in which militants from each of the republics (*vilayats*, according to the militants' terminology) take their oath to the emir for the second time. Furthermore, a statement from one of the most influential spiritual leaders of jihad, the Jordanian sheikh Abu Muhammad al-Makdisi, was published in early August. In this recording, the sheikh thanked Kebekov for his assistance in the jihad in Syria and called upon Caucasian fighters to show him obedience (in fact, Kebekov, like Umarov before, was opposed to the Caucasian militants leaving to become engaged in the jihad in Syria, being aware of the fact that this will weaken the military struggle in the Caucasus)¹⁰.

¹⁰ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XQPRYqUszg8#t=413>

IV. THE EFFECTS OF CHECHENISATION AND THE 'CARROT AND STICK' TACTIC

The consequences of the Russian policy towards the region, above all Chechnya, constitute an equally important reason for the partial stabilisation in the Caucasus. The so-called Chechenisation policy in place since around 2002 has called for replacing the previous policy of occupation of Chechnya (which was implemented by federal law enforcement agencies), relinquishing power in the republic to the loyal Kadyrov clan (to Akhmad Kadyrov until 2004, and then to his son, Ramzan), offering the republic genuine internal independence, guaranteeing stable financing from the federal budget and entrusting the government in Grozny with responsibility for combating the military underground in exchange for stabilisation of the situation using any possible means¹¹. Since both parties (President Vladimir Putin and the Kadyrovs) have observed the terms of the unwritten agreement, this policy has been consistently implemented, resulting in genuine stabilisation of the situation in Chechnya, which is at present the most peaceful republic in the North Caucasus (without considering the traditionally peaceful Northern Ossetia, Karachay-Cherkessia and Adygea). The stabilisation in Chechnya became possible owing to the policy adopted by the Kadyrovs – a skilful combination of the use of force (bloody terror with regard to militants who refused to lay down arms and their families, and informant activity developed on an unprecedented scale), political methods (amnesties for militants and their inclusion in the troops being formed under the government's auspices, neutralisation or physical liquidation of opponents from other clans, and creation of a dictatorship) and ideology (drawing upon Chechen nationalism and Sufi Islam, and contesting Salafi ideas). Although by establishing a dictatorship in Chechnya Kadyrov broke the egalitarianism, which was very

¹¹ For more on the Chechenisation policy see: Maciej Falkowski, 'Chechnya: between a Caucasian jihad and 'hidden' separatism', *OSW Point of View*, 2007; <http://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/publikacje/policy-briefs/2007-01-15/chechnya-between-a-caucasian-jihad-and-hidden-separatism>

strong in Chechen society, and violated the centuries-long tradition where the exercise of power must be based on a compromise between the *teyps* (families) and the *virds* (branches of Sufi brotherhoods¹²), Chechen society, exhausted by the long war and additionally deprived of their most active members, who had emigrated, were ready to accept Kadyrov's dictatorship.

The price Moscow is paying for the stabilisation is high. A quasi-independent state is being formed in Chechnya under Kadyrov's rule, and contacts between Moscow and Grozny resemble that of a confederation model. Chechnya is gaining more and more autonomy every year: the republic is governed by its own rules (a mix of Sharia law, *adats*, i.e. Chechen customary laws, and the principle of 'might is right'; Russian legislation is in use only to a limited extent), is forming in fact its own armed forces (the formations which report to Kadyrov are only formally affiliated to the federal structures), and maintains limited foreign contacts (mainly economic; Kadyrov has his unofficial representatives in selected countries, such as Ukraine, Turkey and France; developing contacts with Islamic countries). In civilisational terms, Chechnya is so strongly de-Russified and Islamised that it is difficult to see it as part of the Russian Federation. However, Moscow is ready to pay this high price, being aware of the fact that the only alternative is the return to the situation seen in the 1990s and destabilisation of the republic.

The situation has become calmer in the other republics as a consequence of two paradoxically mutually excluding factors. On the one hand, one can feel the long-term consequences of the policy of easing the repression used against peaceful Salafis (the Sufi-Salafi dialogue in Dagestan) and the militants who had decided to lay

¹² Kadyrov has used as the religious base the strongest Chechen Sufi brotherhood, the Kunta-haji brotherhood, whose founder, Kunta-haji Kishiev, as opposed to Imam Shamil, propagated in the second half of the 19th century the need to end the war and reach a compromise with Russians for the sake of the Chechen nation's physical survival.

down arms (the promising results of the efforts for rehabilitation of former militants made by the president of Ingushetia, Yunusbek Yevkurov) implemented in 2011–2013. On the other hand, these are the outcomes of the brutal pacifications carried out in late 2013/early 2014 as part of the preparations for the Sochi Olympics. Russian law enforcement agencies physically liquidated dozens of militants and their supporters across the Caucasus as part of special operations and (in the case of Chechnya) air forces launched massive bombardments of the militants' hiding places. The anti-terrorist operation in Chechnya has been successful mainly due to the fact that, as part of the Chechenisation policy, the main responsibility for combating the guerrillas has been placed on Kadyrov's troops (*de facto* formed by former militants), which are much more effective than the federal forces. Similar methods also began to be used on a smaller scale in the other republics (Dagestan and Ingushetia), where, in addition to all this, young people who have no combat experience predominate among the militants (hence the huge losses among their ranks).

V. THE ILLUSORY STABILISATION

Although the clashes in the Caucasus have become noticeably less intensive, peace in the region is illusory and precarious, since it has resulted from a change in the situation and not the system. It is not an end product of a lasting solution to the region's most pressing political, social and economic problems, which generate chronic instability.

The main problem Moscow has failed to resolve is the Caucasus's integration with the rest of Russia; its civilisational distinctness from the rest of the country is constantly deepening. Furthermore, the policy of Chechenisation and isolation of the Caucasus (for example, a limited number of Caucasian recruits have been called up to the Russian army between 2001 and 2014; emigrants for this region are discriminated against as regards employment in the state administration; the Caucasus was granted the status of a separate federal district in 2010) proves that the federal government's attempts at counteracting de-Russification have not only been unsuccessful but they have also in fact contributed to this process. The slogan 'stop feeding the Caucasus' is gaining popularity, and what used to be a marginal idea, namely separating the Caucasus from Russia, is being propagated by increasingly wider political circles (including above all Russian nationalists)¹³.

The Caucasus's stability is closely linked to the stability of Russia itself. A serious economic and/or political crisis in the Russian Federation, which cannot be ruled out in the immediate future, will be equivalent to an 'unfreezing' of the Caucasian problems, which may explode with new strength (as happened in 1917 or 1991). Another factor which adds to the risk of a serious

¹³ For more see: Maciej Falkowski, 'The 'Tribal Areas' of the Caucasus. The North Caucasus - an enclave of 'alien civilisation' within the Russian Federation', *OSW Point of View*, 2010; <http://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-studies/2010-04-14/tribal-areas-caucasus-north-caucasus-enclave-alien-civilisation>; Wojciech Górecki, *op. cit.*

destabilisation in the Caucasus is the tradition of using this region as a useful instrument in Russian political games. The present stability may also be disturbed, if subsidies from the federal budget to the Caucasian republics, which now account for 80-90% of the local budgets, are decreased. Concerns that the situation could develop this way have been expressed during the discussion on the costs of the annexation of Crimea by Russia and the consequences of the Western and Russian sanctions imposed in connection with the Ukrainian crisis. These concerns are not groundless, given the fact that the Accounts Chamber of the Russian Federation has confirmed that it is necessary to decrease the subsidies for the North Caucasus¹⁴.

The 'unfreezing' of the Caucasian problems, especially if this comes from the Kremlin loosening its grip on the region as a consequence of an internal crisis, may lead above all to a rejuvenation of the idea of Chechen independence. Ramzan Kadyrov is laying the foundations for this idea much more successfully than General Dzhokhar Dudayev did in the early 1990s. The Caucasus Emirate idea may also gain new energy in a situation like this, since the struggle to build a single Islamic state is deeply rooted in the Caucasus and may attract many more supporters than currently, when chaos comes and the state structures are weakened (as with the Islamic fundamentalists who have widely employed the slogans of social justice in such countries as Iraq, Afghanistan and Somalia).

The situation in the Caucasus has more and more in common with the developments in the Middle East, which is a novelty. The present situation in the Middle East (deepening chaos) contributes to stabilisation in the Caucasus and is favourable from the Russian government's point of view (local recruits and émigré Chechens are heading to Syria and Iraq instead of the Caucasus). However,

¹⁴ <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/245652/>. The Accounts Chamber of the Russian Federation is a parliamentary body in charge of financial supervision.

the globalisation of the Caucasian jihad and the participation of numerous Caucasian militants in the battles in the Middle East may become a problem for Russia in the longer run. Although it does not seem probable at the moment, if the geopolitical conditions become favourable to the Caucasian mujahideen (Russia losing its grip on the Caucasus alongside chaos in the region), they may return to the Caucasus. Seasoned in battle and with extensive contacts in the international terrorist network, they would then become a much more serious military and political power.

Chechnya, as governed by Kadyrov, is the key element of the present political puzzle in the Caucasus. However, its stability is to an equal extent tangible and ephemeral, since it is based on unstable elements: the unwritten agreement between Vladimir Putin and Ramzan Kadyrov and the dictatorship imposed by the latter on the Chechen public and clans. If the Kremlin got rid of Kadyrov or – which is a more likely scenario in the Caucasus – the president was killed in an attack (and the initiators of the attack may be driven by personal rather than political motives, e.g. a family vendetta), the present political system, which is not based on a consensus between the public and the local clans, would very likely be thrown into disarray. This would also give rise to internal conflicts in the republic, the consequences of which are difficult to predict.

MACIEJ FALKOWSKI

The North Caucasus



Abbreviations: N. O. – North Ossetia; S. O. – South Ossetia; ING. – Ingushetia

The virtual Caucasus Emirate which the militants are fighting to establish



Source: www.kavkazcenter.com



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