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CHECHNYA – RUSSIA’S QUAGMIRE

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20030822 084

USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

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ABSTRACT

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TITLE: CHECHNYA – RUSSIA'S QUAGMIRE

FORMAT: Strategy Research Project

DATE: 15 December 2002 PAGES: 32 CLASSIFICATION: Unclassified

This study will examine the Russian campaign to eradicate the Chechen separatist/terrorist movement. The paper will explore the motives behind the struggle, Russian and Chechen strategic objectives and the implications for regional and international security that flow from the conflict. Particular emphasis is placed on examining alleged Chechen links to the al-Qaeda global terrorist network.

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CHECHNYA – RUSSIA'S QUAGMIRE

Our mothers dedicated us to our Nation and our Homeland. And we shall rise up to the last one if our nation needs us. We grew up free as the eagles, princes of the mountains. There is no threshold from which we shall shy away.

Sooner shall cliffs of granite begin to melt like molten lead than any one of us shall lose in battle the honor of our noble nature. Never to bow our heads to anyone, we give our sacred pledge. To die or live in freedom is our fate.

—“Death or Freedom” (Chechen National Anthem)

With the dissolution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in 1991, the wheels were soon set in motion for challenges to Moscow's preeminence over its former empire. While in the main these challenges evolved peacefully, there were some that generated violent confrontations and struck at the core of the Kremlin's once unquestioned authority. The Caucasus region was now home to the three newly independent states of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. Historically, the region had been a powder keg of discontent for the Soviet regime and the Russian Federation would soon find itself confronted with issues in all three of the states. Russia's far more serious challenge from the Caucasus region, however, was to arise from within the northern Caucasus area inside its own borders – Chechnya.

As way of background, Chechnya is but one of the 89 federal entities that constitute the Russian Federation. These 89 entities are divided into 49 oblasts, 21 republics, 10 autonomous okrugs, six krais, two federal cities (Moscow and Saint Petersburg) and one autonomous okrug. Many of these entities are geographically delineated on the basis of major ethnic groupings. Chechnya, as one of the 21 constituent republics, is just such an example. Located in the southwest corner of the Russian Federation, Chechnya lies in the region commonly referred to as the Caucasus. Situated between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea, the Caucasus draws its name from the Caucasus Mountains which dominate the region. Russia has traditionally referred to its constituent federal entities in this area as being in the North Caucasus as they are found to the north of the Caucasus Mountains.

In studying the region, however, it is equally important to distinguish the term Caucasus from the term Transcaucasus. While also situated in the Caucasus region, the term Transcaucasus specifically refers to those countries situated south of the Caucasus Mountains – Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia.

Within the past decade Russia has waged two bitter military campaigns (1994-1996 and 1999-present day) in an effort to quell Chechen moves towards outright independence. After examining the centuries-old historical background of this conflict, the paper will review these two most recent episodes as well as their underlying motivations and causes. At present, the situation has evolved into one wherein neither the Russian nor the Chechen side likes the current, chronic low-level hostilities where tangible gains cannot be achieved. Moscow seeks to eliminate Chechen field commanders, see weapons decommissioned and establish a new power structure in the republic while promoting social and economic reconstruction. The Chechens seek to continue their military hostilities to prove they are still viable, able to resist Moscow's troops, and conduct terrorist operations against individual officials.¹

The current Russian-Chechen conflict will not be resolved through political negotiations but rather through the continued application of Russian will and brute force no matter the cost in lives, materiel or appeals to the contrary from segments of the Russian population or the larger world community. While many argue that the opportunity for negotiations must never be taken off the table, in many respects, the conflict is as intractable as that between the Israelis and the Palestinians. On the one side, the Russians seek maintenance of the Russian Federation in its current form for political, security and economic reasons. On the other hand, the Chechens, both fiercely independent and clan-based in their method of operation, seek establishment of an independent homeland. Thrown into this mix is the relatively new dynamic of radical/militant Islam which, as in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, only serves to further complicate the situation.

In support of this thesis, this paper will examine the background of the ongoing Russian-Chechen conflict, review its political and geopolitical underpinnings in the context of Russian and regional stability and lastly explore the growing body of evidence linking the Chechen conflict to the Al Qaeda network and the larger global war on terrorism – an element which the Russians have and will continue to exploit as they pursue their campaign.

THE CHECHENS – AN HISTORICAL PRIMER

To understand the nature of the present day conflict, one must first have an appreciation for the Chechen people and their long historical record of opposition to the Russian and Soviet regimes. Present-day Chechnya covers about 7,000 square kilometers. In 1989, about 1 to 1.2 million people lived within it. As an Autonomous Republic within the Russian Federation, Chechnya was one of only three such republics in which the indigenous nationality comprised a

marked majority of the local population. As recently as 1994, however, almost 30 percent of Chechnya's population was Russian.²

Chechen history as a distinct people dates to at least the seventh century when they were first referred to in Armenian writings.³ Occupying a largely mountainous region of southwestern Russia bordering on the Republic of Georgia, the Chechens are a clan-based society with a strong patriarchal core. In contrast to the Christian nature of their Slavic, Georgian and Armenian neighbors, the Chechens profess Islam of the Sunni sect. Islam first arrived in Chechnya near the end of the eighteenth century and gained wide acceptance by the end of the nineteenth century.⁴ Islam has traditionally been a moderate but strongly held and central component of the Chechen culture and ethnic identity.⁵ The Chechens' fiercely independent nature coupled with their Islamic faith formed the heart of their rabid opposition to anything resembling control over them or their territory. This pattern of opposition may be traced from the times of Tsarist Russia, through the Soviet regime to the present-day Russian Federation.

In their work, The War In Chechnya, authors Stasys Knezys and Romanas Sedlickas suggest that the root of Chechen resistance to Russian authority may be traced to 1663 when the Russians began their first attempt to conquer the Caucasus nations. Knezys and Sedlickas contend that it is from this point in time that Chechnya's first steps towards independence and freedom began. What has followed from this first effort at independence has been over three centuries of continuous armed resistance to the perceived aggressors.⁶ The only period during this time in which there was no effective Chechen resistance was from 1944 – 1956 owing to Stalin's policy of forced deportations of the indigenous Chechen population given the war with Nazi Germany and the Chechens' renewed attempts at revolt and independence.⁷

As the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics fell apart in 1991 therefore, the stage was once again set for a renewed Chechen effort to gain independence. Unlike Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania which could make legitimate claims to their former status as modern, independent states, Chechnya had no such basis. Far from being deterred, retired Soviet Air Force Major General Dzhochar Dudayev, himself a native Chechen, penned yet another chapter in Chechnya's bloody history by proclaiming Chechen independence on November 1, 1991.⁸ The roots of the present-day Russian-Chechen conflict, while technically centuries old, may thus trace their beginnings to this fateful day in November 1991. What has followed in the intervening 11 years has not only been horrific in terms of the toll exacted on the Chechen population and infrastructure but also that exacted on the average Russian citizen's psyche.

During these eleven years, tens of thousands of Russians and Chechens have been killed, thousands more wounded and over 500,000 internally displaced due to the conflict itself.

THE REGIONAL STRATEGIC SETTING

THE ROLE OF OIL AND THE GEOSTRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF THE NORTH CAUCASUS

Historically, Chechnya's importance to Russia grew after it was discovered that Chechen lands were soaked in oil. The first oil well on Chechen territory was drilled in 1893 and by 1914, Chechen oil made up 14 percent of all oil produced in Russia.⁹ In modern times, Chechnya more importantly found itself situated at the strategic crossroads of the Caucasus when it became a matter of the overland movement of oil from the Caspian Sea reserves to Russia's oil handling facilities on the Black Sea coast. One of the main goals of the first major Russian attack on Chechnya on December 12, 1994 was to ensure control of the oil pipeline which runs from Baku, Azerbaijan via Grozny, the Chechen capital, to the Russian city of Tikhoretsk. The pipeline ends at the Russian Black Sea port of Novorossiysk, which the Russians intended as the terminal for the proposed Kazakh and Azerbaijani pipelines. In addition, Grozny boasted a large refinery with a processing capacity of 12 million tons per year.¹⁰

Given this background, to say that oil did not play a part in President Yeltsin's decision to authorize military action against Chechnya in December 1994 would be mistaken. Lack of Russian control over this oil pipeline allowed the Chechens to steal oil and generate a cash flow over which Moscow had absolutely no control.¹¹ During its brief period of self-proclaimed independence under President Dudayev, Chechnya illegally exported crude oil and refined oil products worth hundreds of millions U.S. dollars. The rebel Chechen government worked closely with corrupt politicians in Moscow to obtain the required export licenses.¹² Such is the way of business in the rough and tumble environment of the Caucasus and the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

For the Russians, the North Caucasus and the Transcaucasus are considered as part of a whole "security complex" which includes: the southern oblasts and national republics of Russia e.g., the Adygea, Karachayevo-Cherkesiia, Kabardino-Balkariya and Dagestan Republics among others; Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Turkey and Iran. The North Caucasus continues to play a decisive role in the fate of the Transcaucasus and the Caucasian security complex as a whole. Therefore, events which occur in the North Caucasus have an important impact on life

in the Transcaucasus and Central Asia. Events in Central Asia will also have an effect in an east-west lateral sense as well. It goes without saying that a problem such as Chechnya has and will continue to affect problems in other parts of the Russian North Caucasus such as Dagestan, the Checheno-Ingush border which has never been determined, and the Cossack areas.¹³

THE ROLE OF ISLAM

The opposition in the North Caucasus openly appeals to Islam, frequently couching the ideology of resistance to central authority in religious slogans. This is true first and foremost in Chechnya, which has declared a jihad on Moscow. Moreover, a specific fundamentalist ideology, sometimes incorrectly termed, "Wahhabism," appears to be gaining ground in the region.¹⁴ In Russia 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. 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. 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 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 Dagestan. 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.¹⁵

The war in Chechnya has facilitated the radicalization of Islam in the Northern Caucasus, and within Russia as a whole. Today, Islamic extremism – along with the Islamic renaissance from which it draws its strength – is growing inside the country¹⁶ Dr. Edward W. Walker, Executive Director of the Berkeley Program for Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies at the University of California at Berkeley, makes the argument that in Chechnya, the turn to Islam seems to have been driven primarily by political factors. He contends that this relatively recent turn had nothing to do with the intensity of traditional Chechen commitment to Islamic beliefs and practices as Chechnya was never known as a center of traditional Islamic learning.¹⁷

At least until the early months of the first Chechen War from 1994-1996, 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 of December 1994. The situation only began to change when it became clear that the West would not support Chechen demands for independence, at which point Dudayev began to look to the Islamic world for support.¹⁸

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. Dudayev 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 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.¹⁹

The principal reason why religion is used as an instrument of political struggle by various actors in the North Caucasus is that traditionalism here penetrates the public mind and daily life through religious norms and stereotypes. Furthermore, especially in Chechnya there exist among local authorities well-entrenched forces which seek to use Islam – largely without success – as an instrument of consolidating their peoples and achieving political stability.²⁰

Across the Russian Federation itself, the phenomenon of an Islamic renaissance continues to develop. One part of the rebirth has been the inevitable politicization of Islam and the appearance – on both the national and regional levels – of various Islamic parties and movements which have become (formally or not) legitimate participants in the political process. These organizations are not only "instruments of communication" between different Muslim enclaves; they are also centers for coordinating action within the Russian segment of the Muslim world, and are as such conduits for the interests of the Muslim communities.²¹

The Islamic factor is both influencing the situation inside Russia as well as affecting Russia's foreign policy. Given this factor, it is of special importance that the political radicalization of Islam grew stronger at the end of the twentieth century. In the nations of Central Asia, the Caucasus, in Afghanistan, in the Near East and in other parts of the Muslim world conflicts have been developing in which Islam is one of the most important levers of mobilization, setting major ethnic and social groups into action.²²

The relatively new phenomenon of radical Islam has added an especially serious dimension to the Chechen problem set that has historically been extremely difficult for the Russians to tackle in the first place. In viewing their conflict as directly connected to the larger Muslim struggle for liberation and the creation of a greater Islamic state, the Chechens have become emboldened and even more willing to take greater risks in pursuit of their objectives. Whether this includes Chechen fighters actively participating in combat operations in the Balkans and Afghanistan or boldly and brutally seizing a Moscow theater filled with hundreds of patrons, the days of operations within the confines of Chechnya proper have long since passed. Chechen links to the Al Qaeda terror network are but the latest branch of their never-ending pursuit of an independent Chechen homeland.

STAGES OF THE MODERN DAY RUSSO-CHECHEN CONFLICT – AN OVERVIEW

1991 – 1994 – PRELUDE TO CONFLICT

After unilaterally declaring independence from the Russian Federation on November 1, 1991, President Dudayev's actions through November 1994 placed Chechnya on a collision course with Russia. The Kremlin came to view the continuation of Chechen "independence" as reducing Moscow's authority and ultimately damaging the viability of the Russian Federation. The ongoing anarchy in Chechnya was seen as being a direct threat to other political structures in the North Caucasus, in particular, those of Dagestan and North Ossetia which are viewed as two of the main pillars of Russian policy in the North Caucasus. In addition, from a traditional Russian historical viewpoint, maintenance of the Transcaucasus as a buffer zone to counter Turkish and Iranian ambitions was dependent on firm Russian rule and order in the North Caucasus. Russian influence in the Transcaucasus and the Caspian Basin was therefore vital for the exploitation and control of raw materials including oil and gas as well as the pipelines to transport them.²³

Although President Yeltsin declared martial law in Chechnya on 7 November 1991 and issued an order for Dudayev's arrest, he did little more than to inflame Chechen nationalist fervor and strengthen Dudayev's position. As a case in point, when a battalion of 1,000 Russian troops from the Ministry of Internal Affairs arrived at the Grozny Airport on 9 November 1991, to enforce Yeltsin's order, angry crowds of mountain people and Dudayev's own Chechen National

Guard blocked the airport and the battalion was forced to depart without ever having deplaned.²⁴

Initially therefore, Dudayev held the support of the Chechen people. Over time, however, this would change as Dudayev's failed policies and internal Chechen political infighting led to a collapse of the Chechen economy and rampant organized crime. This, combined with traditional Chechen clan-based rivalries and Moscow's ill-fated covert support to the Dudayev opposition (which itself favored continued integration in the Russian Federation²⁵) were to lay the groundwork for eventual direct Russian intervention in force.

1994 – 1996 – THE FIRST WAR

The first of the two modern day Russo-Chechen conflicts commenced on 11 December 1994 and lasted through 31 August 1996. Unfortunately for the Russians, however, this first operation never lived up to Defense Minister General Pavel Grachev's prideful boast that he would "take Grozny with one airborne assault regiment in two hours."²⁶ While it is not the intent of this paper to focus on specific military tactical or operational failures which contributed to the ultimate withdrawal of Russia's Federal Armed Forces, it is important to note some underlying elements.

First, Moscow's policy was that of force and yet at the same time there was always the lure of further negotiation to achieve some form of solution favorable to Moscow. Robust, concerted and coordinated military action was always restricted by this dual approach of force and negotiation. The second element was that at the critical moment when the Chechen resistance campaign appeared to be on the verge of collapse, the Chechens seized the initiative with bold operations such as the seizure of a Russian hospital in Budennovsk in June 1995, the breakout from the siege of Pervomayskoye in January 1996 and the ambush and destruction of a column from the 245th Motor Rifle Regiment in April 1996. The latter event resulted in over 100 Russian military dead with only eight survivors in a short two-hour period. Finally, the war was not popular on the Russian "home front", particularly with the mothers of the young untrained conscripts whose sons suffered a premature death, either as a result of Chechen action or because of inadequate care and supervision from their own chain of command, or who disappeared without a trace.²⁷

Much of Moscow's inept handling of the first Chechen conflict came as part of a legacy of doubt and confusion arising from the period of absolute shock, utter paralysis and stultification following the demise of the Soviet Union and removal of Communist power. Ultimately, the

Khasavyurt Accords resulted in the withdrawal of Russian Federal Armed Forces from Chechnya, the introduction of elections and the installation of a parliament and president through a democratic process.²⁸ The incredibly explosive nature of the North Caucasus, and the Chechen people in particular, would soon send Chechnya spiraling back into conflict.

Although the 1994 - 1996 Russo-Chechen conflict had laid waste to Chechnya's infrastructure and economic viability, not everyone on the Chechen or Russian side was entirely happy with the cessation of hostilities. Extremist, impatient Chechens wanted to continue the fight with Russia and take the armed struggle for independence to the Russian heartland. There were those in Moscow who harbored legitimate concerns about the possible break up and disintegration of the Russian Federation as a result of the defeat at the hands of a Chechen. The federal armed forces had certainly suffered ignominy in what was for all intents and purposes a devastating defeat, a defeat which had a direct bearing on the weakening of Russian power in the Caucasus-Caspian region, let alone throughout the Russian Federation and its peripheries.²⁹

1997 – 1999 – THE INTER-WAR PERIOD

Thrust into the limelight after Dudayev's death on 21 April 1996, it was Aslan Maskhadov who signed the Khasavyurt Accords with Moscow. Although the exact circumstances surrounding Dudayev's demise remain disputed, the two most widely circulated accounts suggest that either a Russian air-to-ground homing missile or a handheld satellite phone rigged with plastic explosives, was the cause (the Israeli Secret Service has been known to employ a similar form of the latter technique when targeting Hezbollah extremists). As Chechen Chief of Staff, Maskhadov had united rag-tag bands of rebel troops into a victorious army and was the most moderate and pragmatic of the Chechen leaders. Those Chechens who had not fled during the war thus elected him president of Chechnya in 1997.³⁰

This inter-war period was characterized by Maskhadov's formidable task of trying to rebuild a shattered republic and unite competing interest groups. In the end, this proved too much for him to overcome. Chechnya once again quickly degenerated into an outlaw state with rebel commanders and clan leaders fighting for control of lucrative shady businesses.³¹ Chechen gangs kidnapped and ransomed hundreds of civilians and military personnel, including some Russian generals, senior government officials and journalists. Some hostages, including Westerners, were brutally murdered. These actions demonstrated how the Chechens had failed to build an autonomous state that could live in peace with its neighbors or with itself.

Mashkadov allowed terrorism, Islamic militancy and crime to overwhelm Chechnya and spread beyond its borders.³²

The peace deal also left one question very open: Chechnya's independence. Talks about it were repeatedly called off, often on the pretext of renewed terrorist attacks. Charles Blandy of the Conflict Studies Research Centre, part of the British Ministry of Defence, argues that Moscow may have deliberately prevaricated. "Whilst Maskhadov was a person with whom the Russian authorities could work," Mr. Blandy writes, "they perhaps recognized too, that he was possibly the greatest threat to Russian ambitions of keeping Chechnya within the Russian Federation."³³

If in fact that was the tactic, it worked. Disillusioned with a fruitless peace, Maskhadov's ever-impatient field commanders joined the opposition. One of them, Shamil Basayev, together with a Jordanian-born mercenary known as Khattab, led a rebel force numbering some 1,000 Muslim fighters, mostly Chechen, into neighboring Dagestan in July and August 1999. Their stated objective was to detach Dagestan from Russia and to establish a Muslim Northern Caucasus federal state from the Black Sea to the Caspian. Several hundred Russian soldiers were killed while pushing these guerilla fighters back into Chechnya. Also in August, a series of four explosions rocked the apartment block homes of civilians in Moscow and other Russian cities, killing over 300 men, women and children. Although the Kremlin blamed the Chechens, no proof to that effect was ever put forth.³⁴ On the other hand, there is also no evidence to suggest, as the Chechens and others have claimed, that the Russians themselves staged the bombings to generate public support for a second campaign in Chechnya. Regardless, these events provided Moscow with the justification and rationale it required for a second invasion.

1999 – PRESENT – THE SECOND WAR

Three years of de facto Chechen independence did not bring peace to Chechnya, the North Caucasus or to the rest of Russia. In 1999, Russians were whipped up by an emotional wave of outrage and anger when guerrillas from Chechnya invaded neighboring Dagestan as well as by the terrorist explosions of apartment blocks in Moscow and other cities. This mood was reflected not only in the nature and methods of the looming second Chechen campaign: it played an enormous and possibly decisive role during the Russian Federation's parliamentary and presidential elections of winter 1999 – spring 2000 – elections which led to Vladimir Putin's ascendance to the Russian presidency.³⁵

The second Chechen campaign was launched under the banner of an anti-terrorist operation. Unlike the first Chechen war, the second war started out not as a battle for territorial integrity and constitutional order, but for the security of society.³⁶ After the September 2001 terror attacks on the United States, "Chechnya" was promptly written into the context of the global war against terrorism. Without doubt, there is terrorism in Chechnya. But terrorism is hardly the dominant element of this situation in which such phenomena as separatism and also ordinary banditry play a crucial role.³⁷

As federal troops entered the territory of the Chechen Republic in September of 1999, they achieved quick and remarkable results. The threat of destabilization in the North Caucasus was eradicated and a considerable number of Chechen separatist military formations were liquidated. The lowlands of Chechnya were brought under Russian control.³⁸

The Russian military had clearly learned from the terrible mistakes it made in the 1994 -1996 operation. To some extent, the military also drew upon the NATO experience in the Balkans earlier that year. Federal troops strove to maximize their military and technical advantages by attacking the enemy from a distance, striking from the air and using artillery. They surrounded and blocked residential areas giving the local population a choice: either oust the rebels themselves or run the risk of being attacked by federal troops. In December 1999, this tactic drove away separatist factions from all major towns and settlements in the Chechen lowlands, with the important exception of Grozny.³⁹

Perhaps the most significant change aiding the military's ability to prosecute the operation was the fact that Russian political authorities virtually allowed the Russian military command to conduct warfare *carte blanche*. In contrast to the first Chechen War, the military now received a guarantee that the former tactics of frequent moratoriums and cease-fires that led to the irritation and suspicions of "treason" among the troops would not be repeated this time.⁴⁰ The consistent, resolute firmness of the Russian political authorities in prosecuting the war in Chechnya, having secured the backing of Russian society as a whole, cannot be overstated.⁴¹

While the intensity of military operations in Chechnya in this second phase of the conflict has been reduced, the gunfire, guerrilla raids and acts of terrorism (to include the bold October 2002 strike at the heart of Moscow) have not ceased. Although the conflict may seem localized, the war in Chechnya is a nationwide problem for Russia – not least because of the current policy of universal military service and the practice of ordering militiamen from across the country to pull a tour of duty in the North Caucasus.⁴²

THE AL-QAEDA CONNECTION

Evidence of a direct Chechen connection to al-Qaeda includes several threads. One concerns reported ties between Osama bin Laden and the Chechen warlord Khattab, a Jordanian-born fighter who was killed in Chechnya in April 2002. Khattab apparently first met bin Laden when both men were fighting the 1979-89 occupation of Afghanistan.⁴³ Bin Laden and Khattab enjoyed an unusually close theological affinity and exchanged personnel and resources. In Chechnya, Khattab was made operations chief under the overall commander, Shamil Basayev. Like Khattab, Basayev had trained in al-Qaeda camps and was personally close to bin Laden. This bin-Laden-Khattab-Basayev nexus – the Chechen connection – is a scarlet thread in the otherwise murky world of global jihad.⁴⁴ The U.S. ambassador to Moscow, Alexander Vershbow, said shortly after September 11, “We have long recognized that Osama bin Laden and other international networks have been fueling the flames in Chechnya, including the involvement of foreign commanders like Khattab.”⁴⁵

Individuals linked to the September 11 attacks may also have ties to Chechnya. A Moroccan man charged with abetting the hijackers told a German court in October 2002 that the plot’s ringleader, Mohammad Atta, initially planned to join the fight in Chechnya. The *Wall Street Journal* has also reported that Zacarias Moussaoui, whom U.S. authorities have charged with being the “20th hijacker” in the September 11 attacks, was formerly “a recruiter for al-Qaeda-backed rebels in Chechnya.”⁴⁶ The 9/11 hijackers from Mohammad Atta’s Hamburg, Germany cell initially joined al-Qaeda to fight in Chechnya. According to the Moroccan’s testimony, Atta came to the attention of al-Qaeda’s inner leadership while training for the Chechen jihad.⁴⁷

Although Atta and his crew were chosen by al-Qaeda for a “holier” mission, bin Laden has sent many brigades of non-native Muslims to fight in Chechnya.⁴⁸ For its part, Russian authorities, including President Putin, have repeatedly stressed the involvement of international terrorists and bin Laden associates in Chechnya – in part to generate Western sympathy for Russia’s military campaign against the Chechen rebels. Russian Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov has also claimed that a videotape of Khattab meeting with bin Laden had been found in Afghanistan, but Russia has not aired the tape publicly.⁴⁹

At the start of 2002, Russian security officials estimated that over 300 foreign jihadists were with the Chechens. U.S. intelligence calculates that a hardened al-Qaeda cell of perhaps 100 militants is holding together an otherwise rag-tag band of Chechens in their lawless Georgian sanctuary, the Pankisi Gorge.⁵⁰ In October 2002, the Georgians appeared to confirm this suspicion when they captured 15 Arab militants in the gorge and remanded them to U.S.

custody. Among those reportedly turned over was one of bin Laden's top operatives – military expert and instructor Saif al Islam el Masray. Al Islam, an Egyptian, was trained by both al-Qaeda and by the Iranian terror front Hezbollah. According to the October 2002 U.S. federal indictment of Enaam Arnaout, executive director of the Benevolence Foundation in Illinois, al Islam served as an officer of Benevolence's Chechen branch.⁵¹

On the flip side, as with other jihadists under the al-Qaeda umbrella, the Chechens have made common cause with Palestinian terrorists. In October 2000 a Chechen leader offered 150 mujahadin from Chechnya as "readily available to perform jihad in Palestine. We ask Allah to destroy the heartless Jews and the Allies. Amen."⁵² The Taliban regime in Afghanistan was one of the only governments to recognize Chechen independence, and Chechen militants reportedly fought alongside al-Qaeda and Taliban forces against the U.S.-backed Northern Alliance in late 2001.⁵³

Azerbaijani officials have also alleged that the failed plot to kill Russian President Putin during a visit to Azerbaijan in January 2001 had Chechen and al-Qaeda links. The would-be assassin, an Iraqi, had trained in Afghanistan in the mid-1990s, fought in Chechnya and had contacts with al-Qaeda associates.⁵⁴

THE VIEWS OF THE RUSSIAN ON THE STREET

"Negotiate?" retorts Zakir, a Muscovite of mixed Russian and Azeri descent, with an angry look. "Look here: you can negotiate with the Dagestanis, with the Circassians, with the Ossetians, but you can't negotiate with the Chechens!" This is pretty much what the average Russian thinks about Chechens now and it is pretty much what they thought about them long before the October 2002 Moscow theater hostage crisis. The Russians view the Chechens as bloodthirsty barbarians. The Chechens think the Russians are imperialist tyrants.⁵⁵

The Russian-Chechen conflict continues to weigh heavily on the psyche of the average Russian citizen. A United States Department of State-sponsored survey of 1,865 Russian adults (18 and older) selected from throughout Russia between 24 May and 8 June 2001 revealed that Russians are more likely to consider rebels in Chechnya, Islamic extremism, terrorism and social disorder as serious threats to Russia's national security than any threat posed by the United States. When asked to name the first and second greatest threats to Russia's national security, about two-fifths mentioned either the situation in the North Caucasus (16%), the spread of Islamic fundamentalism (12%) or terrorism (11%).⁵⁶ Although no survey data was available to document Russian views post-September 11, 2001, one may assume that

the results would be similar if not skewed even higher. In addition, the Chechens' October 2002 ill-fated attempt to pursue their aims via the Moscow theater seizure/hostage taking likely only reinforced the average Russian's view that the Chechen situation must be dealt with firmly. The fact that there was surprisingly little public outrage directed at the Putin administration (given the great loss of innocent life due to the Russian security forces' tactics), speaks volumes to the depths of Russian resentment for the Chechen cause and their terrorist methods.

Similarly, it was interesting to note that although nearly a decade had elapsed between the time of the survey and the USSR's demise, most Russians still harbored fond memories of the Soviet Union. In Department of State Office of Research surveys conducted since 1992, majorities (ranging from 54% to 81%) have consistently agreed that "it is a great misfortune that the Soviet Union no longer exists." In this latest survey, 71 percent subscribed to this view. 50% agreed "completely," while only 26% disagreed. The proportion of those who agreed completely was much higher among those 60 years of age and older (69%) than among those under 30 (25%).⁵⁷

If one is to take these survey results as accurately reflecting the attitudes of the average Russian citizen, it is not hard to envision why President Yeltsin and now President Putin have pursued similar iron-fisted policies towards Chechnya. Although one may argue that Yeltsin and Putin had no need to take the sentiments of their citizenry into account when shaping their policies toward Chechnya, the fact that the Russian populace is genuinely concerned with the conflict only lends added support to their policies. Although there have been a few periods over the past 11 years wherein the Russians' have briefly retreated from their Chechnya policies (owing largely to the occasional severe Russian military casualties suffered and the resultant Russian public outcry), the Yeltsin and Putin administrations have largely stayed the course.

NEGOTIATIONS – THE DEVIL'S CIRCLE

While hope always springs eternal, there is little reason to believe that a resolution to the Russo-Chechen conflict will be forthcoming in the near term. As alluded to in the introduction, the conflict has many similarities to that of the long-standing Israeli-Palestinian conflict – two parties locked in a battle of strong-minded wills with neither side willing to compromise and where brute force and terror tactics are the tools of choice. Clearly the events of September 11, 2001 have colored the situation in Russia's favor as the world community joins forces in the war on terrorism. The Chechen leadership's decision to allow and, in some cases, to adopt the

ideology, objectives and methods of al-Qaeda as part of its political platform will cause more harm than good in the end.

What then are the core positions of the Russian government and the Chechens? Before examining them, a quote from General Andrei Nikolayev, Director of the Federal Border Service of Russia merits attention. He made the statement following the signing of the Khasavyurt Accords which brought an end to the First Chechen War:

History testifies: to start a war rapidly is easy, but to end a war quickly is very complicated. Declaration of a ceasefire is still not the cessation of war, it is not the achievement of peace. A colossal time is required to adapt people to that situation in which they find themselves. Possibly it requires a few generations before people return to a normal state, the wound is scarred over, they forget injuries and losses. Therefore, probably, it is too early to say that the Chechen problem will be rapidly resolved. One can negotiate on what to do and how to go further. But to report that tomorrow everything that has happened in Chechnya has ceased, seems to me frivolous and irresponsible.⁵⁸

THE RUSSIAN FEDERAL POSITION

The Russians have insisted that the armed opposition in Chechnya must surrender and hand over all its weapons before any negotiations can take place. Moreover, the Russian President proposed to the illegal armed bandit formations that they should immediately terminate all contact with international terrorists and their organizations. Furthermore, they must decide to halt all diversionary actions and activities; in return Federal forces would stop their counter-terrorist activities. It is important to note that the President proposed to start discussions, not on the political fate of the Chechen people and status of Chechnya, but on the process of disarming the illegal formations solely in the context of their returning to a normal and peaceful life. Moscow will also insist on making the following demands in negotiations with the armed resistance in Chechnya: 1) first and foremost, the prevention of Chechnya becoming a hotbed of Islamic radicalism, terrorism and gangsterism ever again, 2) second, in order to integrate the territory of Chechnya into the overall defensive and transport-communication space of Russia, there must be neither Turkish nor mujahadin bases there. Border servicemen and customs officials must also ensure access to Georgia and the Caspian littoral and finally 3) to obtain

reliable guarantees for legal and socio-economic stability in Chechnya, which must neither become a haven for bandits, nor a breeding ground of destitution and epidemics.⁵⁹

The situation for the federal authorities has been made much worse by their unwillingness to negotiate directly with President Maskhadov. Presidents Yeltsin and Putin have refused to consider negotiations with Maskhadov, despite many requests by him for talks.⁶⁰ Additionally, the temporary imposition of a pro-Russian administrator in Chechnya serves to promote further division. This complicates the search not only for a cessation to hostilities but in the number of parties to be considered in an equitable settlement which may eventually provide a basis for peace.⁶¹ President Putin is thus confronted with two challenges. First, there is the challenge of multiculturalism. Second, there is the need to harmonize Muslim cultural autonomy with the European model of development of Russia as a whole.⁶² Using Chechnya as the test bed, President Putin's ability to resolve these issues will serve as the yardstick against which his political legacy as well as the future integrity of the Russian Federation will be measured.

THE CHECHEN POSITION

In the very simplest of terms, the Chechen position revolves around four core elements: 1) withdrawal of federal troops, 2) binding international guarantees that Russia will not re-introduce troops, 3) speedy international recognition of Chechen independence and 4) an international tribunal for all those who have committed war crimes.⁶³ While simple in intent, the very nature of Chechnya's clan-based structure and the formal introduction of foreign elements into the conflict have immeasurably complicated the matter. The fact that there are currently three different armed groups resisting the Russians in Chechnya clearly undermines any attempt at a unified Chechen position. The first group is the "official" Chechen Republic represented by President Maskhadov. Unfortunately, the Kremlin's mistaken decision to reduce his influence to a purely nominal status, thus dispensing with his rightful claim to represent all the people, has lowered him in the eyes of both peaceful and fighting Chechens. The second group is comprised of the composite traditional home guard detachments operating on their own initiative largely with the motivation to avenge the deaths of family and loved ones suffered at the hands of the Russian forces. Finally, the third group centers around the militarized and strictly structured organization of the "Wahhabites", a pro-Arab group which seeks the creation of an Islamic state combining the Dagestan Republic and the Chechen Republic. It is within this group that most of the foreign interventionists reside. Their plans are first and foremost linked to an Arab East and a future Islamization of Chechnya along Arab lines.⁶⁴

CONCLUSION

Centuries of a deep-rooted Chechen longing for outright independence from any form of domination, no matter how intrusive or superficial, make it highly unlikely that the current Russo-Chechen conflict will be resolved through a negotiated settlement. Absent unequivocal independence and full control over their territory, any thought that the Chechens will willingly abandon their armed struggle is simply pure illusion. To cite a verse from the Chechen national anthem, "Death or Freedom": "Sooner shall the earth begin to crack in silence from the heat than we shall lie under the earth, having lost our honor."

The Russians, in many respects still stinging from the loss of their former empire and the resultant decline in their world standing – both politically and economically – will never cede to the demands of a segment of their own society which they have traditionally viewed as lawless and outright barbaric. If anything, the current world situation with its global spread of Islamic extremism, makes it all the more critical that Russia does everything within its power to secure its increasingly vulnerable, yet equally important, strategic southern flank. If this means the application of outright force, so be it.

While there are many voices both within and outside Russia which call for a negotiated settlement, these same voices also recognize the incredibly vexing political context in which this drama is set. Of the two most likely solutions – independent Chechnya or Chechnya with significant autonomy inside the Russian Federation – only the latter has a chance to be viable at all.⁶⁵ Any thought of a practical political solution would have to start by combining the vital interest of Russia – security – with the vital interests of Chechnya – opportunity for independent development, postwar restoration and the need of its citizens to earn a living freely and legally. After two wars, it must be clearly understood that the problem is not the status of Chechnya but rather in the nature of its relationship with Moscow. Full integration of the Republic of Chechnya into the Russian Federation is impossible – it is hindered by historical memory, experience of the past decade's two wars, peculiarities of the Chechen mentality, customs, etc. However, it is also impossible to envision Chechnya's complete independence from Russia, considering the numerous Diaspora, enormous economic dependence, geographical position etc.⁶⁶ Idealism aside, it is more likely then that the conflict will increasingly take on the form of that witnessed between the Israelis and the Palestinians – a decades-long protracted struggle with each side vigorously adhering to its respective position, quick to use indiscriminate force and refusing to yield for humanity's greater good.

It was therefore not without meaning that this paper was entitled “Chechnya – Russia’s Quagmire,” for a quagmire it is and will remain.

WORD COUNT = 7,111

ENDNOTES

¹ Robert M. Cutler, "Chechnya," 2001; available from <http://www.selfdetermine.org/conflicts/chechen_body.html>; Internet; accessed 14 December 2002.

² Stasys Knezys and Romanas Sedlickas, The War in Chechnya (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1999), 9.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 12.

⁵ Johanna Nichols, "Who are the Chechens?," 1995; available from <http://socrates.berkeley.edu/%7Eebsp/caucasus/articles/nichols_1995-chechen.pdf>; Internet; accessed 14 December 2002.

⁶ Knezys and Sedlickas, 12.

⁷ Ibid., 15.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 14.

¹⁰ Ariel Cohen, "The New 'Great Game': Oil Politics in the Caucasus and Central Asia," 25 January 1996; available from <<http://www.idis.com/ChouOnline/xxb-oilgame.txt>>; Internet; accessed 8 December 2002.

¹¹ Ariel Cohen, "The War In Chechnya: What Is At Stake?," 30 November 1999; available from <<http://www.heritage.org/Research/RussiaandEurasia/BG1339.cfm>>; Internet; accessed 8 December 2002.

¹² Cohen, "The New 'Great Game': Oil Politics in the Caucasus and Central Asia."

¹³ C.W. Blandy, Chechnya: The Need to Negotiate, (Camberley, England: Conflict Studies Research Centre, 2001), 3.

¹⁴ Aleksei Malashenko, "Moscow Between Yugoslavia and Chechnya: The Kosovo Factor in Russia's Policy on the Caucasus," 7 July 1999; available from <<http://pubs.carnegie.ru/english/briefings/1999/issue07-99.asp>>; Internet; accessed 8 December 2002.

¹⁵ Edward W. Walker, "Islam in Chechnya," 13 March 1998; available from <<http://socrates.berkeley.edu/%7Ebsp/caucasus/newsletter/1998-06.pdf>>; Internet; accessed 14 December 2002.

¹⁶ Aleksei Malashenko and Dmitri Trenin, The Time of the South: Russia in Chechnya, Chechnya in Russia, (Moscow, Russia: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2002), 257.

¹⁷ Walker, "Islam in Chechnya."

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Malashenko, "Moscow Between Yugoslavia and Chechnya: The Kosovo Factor in Russia's Policy on the Caucasus."

²¹ Malashenko and Trenin, 260.

²² Ibid.

²³ C.W. Blandy, Chechnya: Two Federal Interventions An Interim Comparison and Assessment, (Camberley, England: Conflict Studies Research Centre, 2000), 11.

²⁴ Knezys and Sedlickas, 20.

²⁵ Ibid., 22.

²⁶ Blandy, Chechnya: Two Federal Interventions An Interim Comparison and Assessment, 13.

²⁷ Ibid., 20.

²⁸ Ibid., 23.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ "The Lost Cause of the Caucasus," 31 October 2002; available from <http://www.economist.com/displayStory.cfm?story_ID=1416319>; Internet; accessed 31 October 2002.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Cohen, "The War In Chechnya: What Is At Stake?"

³³ "The Lost Cause of the Caucasus."

³⁴ Cohen, "The War In Chechnya: What Is At Stake?"

³⁵ Malashenko and Trenin, 261.

³⁶ Cohen, "The War In Chechnya: What Is At Stake?"

³⁷ Malashenko and Trenin, 258.

³⁸ Dmitri Trenin, "Chechnya: Effects of the War and Prospects for Peace," January 2000; available from <<http://pubs.carnegie.ru.english/briefings/2000/issue01-00.asp>>; Internet; accessed 8 December 2002.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Blandy, Chechnya: Two Federal Interventions An Interim Comparison and Assessment, 46.

⁴² Malashenko and Trenin, 261.

⁴³ "Chechnya-based Terrorists," 2002; available from <http://www.terrorimanswers.com/groups/chechens.html>; Internet; accessed 14 December 2002.

⁴⁴ Mark Riebling and R.P. Eddy, "Jihad @ Work," 24 October 1992; available from <http://www.nationalreview.com/comment/comment-riebling102402.asp>; Internet; accessed 14 December 2002.

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⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Riebling and Eddy, "Jihad @Work."

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⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ "Chechnya-based Terrorists."

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⁵⁵ "The Lost Cause of the Caucasus."

⁵⁶ Richard B. Dobson, "Though Wary of U.S. MD Plans, Russians Worry More About Chechnya, Other Threats," Opinion Analysis M192-01 (September 6, 2001): 1.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁵⁸ Blandy, Chechnya: The Need to Negotiate, 2.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 8-9.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁶² Malashenko and Trenin. 265.

⁶³ Blandy, Chechnya: The Need to Negotiate, 11.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 10-12.

⁶⁵ Cutler, "Chechnya."

⁶⁶ Trenin, "Chechnya: Effects of the War and Prospects for Peace."

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