

Background

No. 1838
April 1, 2005



Published by The Heritage Foundation

After Maskhadov: Islamist Terrorism Threatens North Caucasus and Russia

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The violent demise on March 8 of Aslan Maskhadov, former president of Chechnya and supreme commander of the Chechen militant forces, is President Vladimir Putin's short-term gain, but it may be Russia's long-term loss. Now the war in Chechnya will further lose its "national liberation" character and the pretense of Chechen independence, which Maskhadov symbolized, and Moscow will confront the deadly face of Islamic extremist terrorism.

As the crisis in the North Caucasus develops, the Bush Administration should follow the situation closely. This can be done through a dialogue with the Russian government and contacts between non-government experts, including representatives of North Caucasus indigenous communities.

Washington should cooperate in tracking and intercepting financial flows, terrorists, technical expertise, and training capabilities. The U.S. and Russia should develop models of identifying, monitoring, and rendering ineffective radical Islamist centers of incitement for violence and terrorist activities—such as mosques and religious academies—without causing casualties among innocent civilians or widespread popular dissatisfaction. The Administration should also assist in strengthening traditional, local, moderate Islam, including support for educational, cultural, spiritual, and media activities in the region.

Finally, the U.S. should cooperate with the federal and local governments in the area, as well as business communities and non-governmental organizations, to apply models of free-market-based economic

Talking Points

- The death of former Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov may be Vladimir Putin's short-term gain, but it is Russia's long-term loss.
- Moscow will now confront the deadly face of Islamic extremist terrorism.
- Washington should cooperate selectively with Russia in tracking and intercepting terrorists' financial flows, technical expertise, and training capabilities. The two sides should develop models of rendering ineffective the radical Islamist centers of incitement for violence and terrorist activities.
- The North Caucasus Islamist movement will try to exploit Maskhadov's memory as a "martyr" to justify more terrorist attacks.
- Islamists believe that their geopolitical goal—the creation of the North Caucasus caliphate—is now closer to being realized. Such an entity, if it should appear, would be a disaster for Russia, for Europe, and for the North and South Caucasus.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
www.heritage.org/research/russiaandeurasia/bg1838.cfm

Produced by the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center
for Foreign Policy Studies
of the

Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute
for International Studies

Published by The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002-4999
(202) 546-4400 • heritage.org

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development and enhancement for the role of women in local societies, which would neutralize the influence of the radical Islamists who are likely to come to power after Maskhadov's death.

A Complicated Figure

Aslan Maskhadov was born in 1951 to a Chechen family forcibly exiled to Kazakhstan by Josef Stalin. A former Soviet artillery colonel, he was essentially a nationalist until the recent rise of militant Islam in the region. He ably commanded the Chechen irregular formations in the first Chechen war and negotiated the Khasavyurt accords with General Alexander Lebed, then-President Boris Yeltsin's National Security Adviser. These accords gave Chechnya *de facto* independence.

Maskhadov was elected president in 1997, defeating the extremist Shamil Basaev. However, his popularity in his native land declined to the point that it was in single digits at the time of his death. He kept Basaev outside of the formal command structure, but his degree of control over Basaev was low. Nevertheless, in January 2005, when he declared a unilateral cease-fire and called for peace talks with the Kremlin, most Chechen factions observed the truce. He also gave up talk about Chechen independence and was reportedly prepared to negotiate Chechnya's broad autonomy within the Russian Federation.

With that, his legacy was difficult: Maskhadov presided over Chechnya's frightful transformation into an anarchy dominated by Shari'a (Islamic law). From 1997 to 1999—the years of Chechnya's quasi-independence under Maskhadov—the region turned into an Islamist terrorist training ground and suffered from over 2,000 kidnappings-for-ransom, the slave trade, and massive trafficking in weapons, drugs, and stolen goods. Court-ordered mutilations for crimes, public hangings, and economic collapse were the order of the day. Maskhadov either could not or would not stop any of it.

Maskhadov publicly distanced himself from horrible mass hostage-taking operations by the terror-

ist warlord Shamil Basaev, such as at Moscow's Dubrovka theater in November 2002, and the September 2004 Beslan school attack in which hundreds died—but he also did not take any steps to prevent such atrocities. On the contrary, in his last interviews, he advocated expansion of terrorist activities beyond Chechnya to the rest of the North Caucasus, with Russian civilians as the targets.

Figurehead Successor

Maskhadov's formal successor is a little-known Islamic law figure (sheikh) named Abdul-Halim Sadullaev. Not known for either religious learning or military prowess, he apparently was Maskhadov's appointed successor to keep Basaev from formally taking power.

This was done both to intimidate Moscow with chaos in case it decided to eliminate Maskhadov and to threaten the Chechen rebel movement with disintegration if such an unknown figure should take the helm. However, Russian sources report that Sheikh Abdul-Halim has issued *fatwas* (religious rulings) allowing murder and terrorist attacks.¹

The Russian Calculus

Russian President Vladimir Putin badly needed a significant victory as his popularity began to deteriorate after the Beslan attacks and mass protests against unpopular cash payments given in lieu of in-kind social benefits. The secret service (FSB) delivered Putin such a victory on International Women's Day—a Russian holiday. Now his plummeting ratings may (or may not) start to climb again.

One year after Putin handily won a second presidential term, his domestic and foreign challenges are snowballing and his aura of almost superhuman invincibility is quickly dissipating. This is not to say that Putin should be counted out: He is still in control. However, one would hope that he does not repeat the mistakes of his predecessors, who brutally suppressed the Chechens regardless of their ideology and the color of their flag.

Leo Tolstoy, the great Russian writer who served in the Caucasus in the mid-19th century as a mili-

1. Khamzat Chitigov, "Na rol' zits-predsdatelia nesushchestvuyushchei respubliki pretenduyut mnogie," *Strana.ru*, March 11, 2005, at www.strana.ru/print/242488.html (March 12, 2005).

tary officer, had this to say about Russian policy in Chechnya and Daghestan under Czar Nicholas I in his classic *Haji Murat*:

[T]he plan of slow movement into the enemy's area through cutting of forests and destruction of food supply was the plan designed by Generals Yermolov and Velyaminov and totally opposed the plan by the czar [Nicholas I]. [The czar's] plan aimed at quick movement to take the residence of Shamil [the resistance leader] and destroy of this nest of robbers.... The czar was proud of both the plan of his expedition of 1845, (which caused numerous casualties and failed), and of the plan of slow movement forward, despite the fact that the two plans clearly contradicted one another.²

In 1850, the czar again ordered his Caucasus Viceroy, Prince Michael Vorontsov, to "firmly follow my system of destruction of dwellings and food supply, and bothering them with incursions."³ The Chechen reaction to the devastation of their settlements and the death of their women, children, and elderly was hardly surprising. According to Tolstoy, who described a village destroyed by the Russian army:

Nobody even discussed hatred toward the Russians. The feeling that all Chechens experienced, from a child to a grown up, was stronger than hatred. It was not hate, but the lack of recognition of these Russian dogs as human beings. It was such a revulsion, disgust and non-comprehension, facing the irrational cruelty of these creatures, that the desire to exterminate them was a natural feeling, as natural as the instinct of self-preservation. [This] was like the desire to exterminate vermin, poisonous spiders and wolves.⁴

The czarist government exiled over 500,000 Chechens, Circassians, and other Muslims to the Ottoman Empire, and they are now found throughout the Middle East, from Turkey to Israel and Jordan. During the Bolshevik regime, Chechens were first exploited in fighting the anti-communist Cossacks, then strafed by airplanes and poisoned with gas in the 1920s.

A full-fledged revolt erupted in the North Caucasus in the late 1930s, only to be brutally put down. In 1944, Stalin, Soviet Foreign Minister V. M. Molotov, and NKVD chief Lavrenti Beria presided over the forcible deportation of the Chechens, Ingush, Crimean Tatars, and others to Siberia and Central Asia, leading to an ethnic cleansing of millions. Chechens and others were allowed to return to their lands only in 1956 after Stalin's death.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Chechens opted for independence, only to be rebuffed. President Putin has admitted that the first Chechen war, unleashed by the Yeltsin administration in the fall of 1994, in which 80,000 to 100,000 people were killed and over 100,000 became internally displaced, was an error.⁵ What is new is the strengthening of links between this struggle and the global terrorist networks, which fundamentally changes both the nature of the war and its geostrategic implications.

A New Reality

With Maskhadov's death, Moscow lost an opportunity to split the Chechens between the more secular supporters of national independence or broad autonomy and radical Islamist "jihadi" terrorists. However, it looks as if the Kremlin did not believe that such an option was on the table: It always made a point of equating Basaev and Maskhadov. Only the representatives of the Russian democratic parties (Yabloko and the Union of Right Forces) have supported talks with Maskhadov, as did the

2. Leo Tolstoy, *Haji Murat*, p. 44, at az.lib.ru/t/tolstoj_lew_nikolaewich/text_0250.shtml (March 12, 2005).

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*

5. Meeting of President Putin with Western experts and journalists, Moscow, Novo-Ogarevo, September 6, 2004, author's notes.

Committee of Soldiers' Mothers, a women's group whose sons served or were killed in Chechnya. Representatives of these groups even traveled to London earlier this year for inconclusive talks with Maskhadov's representatives.

Now the radical Islamist wing, led by Basaev and a Saudi warlord named Abu Havs, who rejects diplomacy and hails "jihad," along with Russian security forces and the military, will dictate the scope and pace of the North Caucasus war.⁶ Abu Havs, also known by the *nom de guerre* Amzhet, financed the attack on Beslan and planned the 2004 incursion into Ingushetia, during which more than 90 people were killed. Regrettably, the likelihood of terrorist mega-attacks like the one in Beslan will also grow. Quickly killing or capturing Basaev is becoming an imperative for the Russian forces.

Wahhabi fighters, with their global networks of financial support and training, would like nothing better than to have Basaev and Abu Havs as supreme military commanders of the North Caucasus—without Maskhadov's meddling. Basaev already trains and equips terrorist units, which grew out of Wahhabi madrasa (religious school) networks in Dagestan, Ingushetia, and Kabardino-Balkaria. Heavy-handed Russian tactics do not seem to be effective in stemming the spread of radical Islamic ideology.

With Maskhadov's death, the time to talk has passed, at least for a while. The paradigm of national liberation and broad Chechen autonomy within the Russian Federation—or even independence—is no longer applicable. Ironically, radical Islamists do not want an independent Chechnya as Maskhadov did. They want nothing less than a caliphate (a Shari'a-based military dictatorship between the Black Sea and the Caspian), which would subsume Chechen national aspirations in favor of a pan-Islamic agenda and Muslim superstate.

What the U.S. Should Do

The United States has no national interest in strengthening Islamist rebellion in the North Cau-

casus. Nor is a Wahhabi-dominated caliphate, a bloody civil war, or disintegration of the Russian Federation, with its thousands of nuclear warheads and a vast military-industrial complex, in America's interests. The Bush Administration therefore should:

- **Follow** the situation closely. This can be done through a dialogue with the Russian government and contacts between non-government experts, including representatives of North Caucasus indigenous communities.
- **Cooperate** in tracking and intercepting financial flows, terrorists, technical expertise, and training capabilities.
- **Develop** models of identifying, monitoring, and rendering ineffective radical Islamist centers of incitement for violence and terrorist activities, such as mosques and religious academies, without causing casualties among innocent civilians or widespread popular dissatisfaction.
- **Assist** in strengthening alternative, moderate Islam, including educational, cultural, spiritual, and media activities in the region.
- **Cooperate** in applying models of free-market-based economic development and enhancement for the role of women in local societies, which would neutralize the influence of radical Islamists.

Conclusion

With Aslan Maskhadov's demise, the North Caucasus Islamist movement, which derided his attempts at diplomacy, will try to exploit his memory as a "martyr" and use his name to justify more terrorist attacks. Islamists believe that their geopolitical goal—the creation of the North Caucasus caliphate—is now closer to being realized. If successful, this scenario would be a disaster for Russia, for Europe, and for the North and South Caucasus.

Such an entity on the doorstep of Europe, controlled by ideological soul mates of Osama bin Laden, would radiate terrorism and religious

6. Mark Franchetti, "Saudi Killer Spearheads Chechen War," *The Sunday Times*, March 13, 2005, as reported on Russia's Johnson List, an electronic news service.

extremism for decades to come. It might become one of the greatest threats to Eurasian security in this century. A secular Shi'a regime ruling over Azerbaijan and its oil fields, and pipelines from the Caspian basin, would also be more prone to terrorist attacks. It is time for the United States to pay serious attention to the threats escalating from the North Caucasus.

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