

How Chechnya Became a Breeding Ground for Terror

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On September 1, 2004, a group of Chechen terrorists took hostage and two days later murdered at least 335 schoolchildren and parents in Beslan, a town in the Russian republic of North Ossetia. The atrocity focused world attention on Chechnya. The Russian government used the event to reiterate its arguments that Chechen terrorists and foreign jihadists supporting them have ideological, financial, and operational ties with Islamist terrorist organizations such as Al-Qaeda.^[1] Although President Vladimir Putin and top Russian security officials provided evidence of links between Chechen fighters and Al-Qaeda, European politicians and mainstream Western journalists focused instead upon the Russian army's brutality and dismissed Putin's claims as an attempt to gain sympathy in the West and deflect criticism of Russia's handling of a nationalist insurgency.

Putin may have been opportunistic, but he was also correct. A close examination of the evolution of the Chechen movement indicates that Islamists and followers of Al-Qaeda have increasingly sought to co-opt the Chechen movement as their own.

Al-Qaeda Adopts the Chechen Cause

Foreign fighters did not have a significant presence in the first Chechen war, which started soon after the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union and ended with the November 1996 Russian retreat and the creation of an autonomous Chechen government led by the late Aslan Maskhadov.^[2] The main Chechen rebel leader during the first war, Dzhokhar Dudayev, had a generally secular nationalist outlook. According to Alexander Iskanderyan, director of the Center for Caucasian Studies in Moscow, "the Chechen independence movement had no Islamic dimension at all."^[3] But when the conflict began to attract media coverage, Islamic jihadis migrated to Chechnya.

Over the last decade, Islamist terrorists have co-opted the Chechen cause as part of a global jihad. Umar Ibn al-Khattab, a Saudi native who became the leader of the foreign mujahideen in Chechnya, said, "This case is not just a Chechen matter but an Islamic matter, like Afghanistan."^[4]

Al-Qaeda's involvement in Chechnya has grown steadily. Drawn by media reports of the Chechen conflict, Ibn al-Khattab and a few aides joined the jihad in the Caucasus in 1995. The same year saw the death of Muhammad Zaki, an American who traveled to Chechnya for the same reason.^[5] With expertise developed in Afghanistan during the 1980s and honed in Tajikistan early the following decade, Ibn al-Khattab made a qualitative contribution to the fight against the Russians. By the summer of 1996, Ibn al-Khattab and his band were involved in the fighting that culminated in the capture of the Chechen capital of Grozny.^[6]

Chechen commanders perceived the foreign jihadists in different ways. Maskhadov, for example, hailed the contribution of "mujahideen from many Islamic states [who] fought by our side. They took up arms and defended our people ... these mujahideen were a great help and support to us."^[7] Other Chechen leaders felt that the presence

of the Afghan Arabs would become a problem: "We do not need them, they will give us a lot of trouble—but we won't be able to stop them," one said.[\[8\]](#)

Russian checkpoints, brutal winters, and the inability of most of the mujahideen to speak even basic Russian diverted many jihadists away from the Caucasus. In 1997, Khalid Sheikh Muhammad, mastermind of the 9-11 attacks on New York and Washington, attempted to join Ibn al-Khattab in Chechnya but was unable to traverse Azerbaijan.[\[9\]](#) Other 9-11 hijackers had also considered making Chechnya their destination. According to planner Ramzi Binalshibh, only a "chance meeting" on a train in Germany with a high-ranking Al-Qaeda operative caused 9-11 hijackers Muhammad Atta, Marwan al-Shehhi, Ziad Jarrah, and Binalshibh to travel to Afghanistan for training instead.[\[10\]](#)

In 1997, Ayman al-Zawahiri, Osama bin Laden's deputy, attempted to enter Chechnya but was arrested by Russian police in Dagestan carrying false documents. The Russian police—still unaware of how deep the international Islamist involvement had become—did not recognize him. They sentenced him to six months, which he served in a Dagestani prison.[\[11\]](#) He later argued that the Chechen conflict could become a strategic linchpin for the jihadist movement in his book, *Fursan taht Rayat ar-Rasul (Knights under the Prophet's Banner)*:

The liberation of the Caucasus would constitute a hotbed of jihad (or fundamentalism as the United States describes it) and that region would become the shelter of thousands of Muslim mujahideen from various parts of the Islamic world, particularly Arab parts. This poses a direct threat to the United States, represented by the growing support for the jihadist movement everywhere in the Islamic world. If the Chechens and other Caucasian mujahideen reach the shores of the oil-rich Caspian Sea, the only thing that will separate them from Afghanistan will be the neutral state of Turkmenistan. This will form a mujahid Islamic belt to the south of Russia that will be connected in the east to Pakistan, which is brimming with mujahideen movements in Kashmir. The belt will be linked to the south with Iran and Turkey that are sympathetic to the Muslims of Central Asia. This will break the cordon that is struck around the Muslim Caucasus and allow it to communicate with the Islamic world in general. Furthermore the liberation of the Muslim Caucasus will lead to the fragmentation of the Russian Federation and will help escalate the jihad movements that already exist in the republics of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, whose governments get Russian backing against those jihadist movements. The fragmentation of the Russian Federation on the rock of the fundamentalist movement and at the hands of the Muslims of the Caucasus and Central Asia will topple a basic ally of the United States in its battle against the Islamic jihadist reawakening.[\[12\]](#)

Most Chechens do not share Zawahiri's strategic vision; they want only independence from Russia. The majority of the Chechen population embraces moderate Sufi traditions and shuns the strict religious interpretation and expansionist political goals that Arab jihadists promote.[\[13\]](#) Nevertheless, several prominent Chechen commanders have teamed up with the foreign mujahideen. While some Chechen commanders have been radicalized by years of war, many others have embraced the jihadi ideology only to become the beneficiaries of the funding from wealthy Persian

Gulf patrons, much as separatists during the Cold War claimed to be communist in order to obtain Soviet support. As radical Islamists convert Chechens from their indigenous Sufi practices toward extremist Salafi or Wahhabi doctrine, increasing numbers of Chechens are embracing Ibn al-Khattab's views, encouraged by *fatwas* endorsing him issued by Al-Qaeda-linked Saudi clerics.[\[14\]](#) "They [the Wahhabis] went to the market and they paid with dollars. There was no power here; there was disorder everywhere, and their influence was very strong," said a Chechen administrator exemplifying the Wahhabis' modus operandi in Chechnya. "The poor Chechen people were already suffering so much, and our young guys simply couldn't think. They were ready to accept any ideas."[\[15\]](#)

The cycle was self-reinforcing. As Islamism supplanted nationalism as the motivating factor of the Chechen cause, hundreds of Muslim youths from the Middle East and Europe flocked to Chechnya. Aukai Collins, a Hawaiian convert to Islam, published an account of fighting in Chechnya.[\[16\]](#) Turkey and Jordan, both home to large ethnic Chechen populations, saw an intense movement of fighters.[\[17\]](#)

Ibn al-Khattab remained the key figure in the spread of international jihad to Chechnya, though. Knowledge of his past is the key to understanding the depth of Al-Qaeda's involvement in Chechnya. While in Afghanistan, his trainer and guide was Hassan as-Sarehi,[\[18\]](#) a prominent commander who, with Osama bin Laden, had led the Arab fighters in the Lion's Den operation against Soviet forces, a legendary battle in which foreign mujahideen say they defeated a much larger force.[\[19\]](#) Regardless of the veracity of their claims, the account has served as the basis for the myth of bin Laden. During this period, Ibn al-Khattab reportedly met both bin Laden, whom Ibn al-Khattab described as "a good man,"[\[20\]](#) and also Al-Qaeda's spiritual leader, Abdullah Azzam. Such contacts would empower Ibn al-Khattab as he expanded his jihad.

Ibn al-Khattab and his followers remained in Chechnya even after Moscow recognized Chechnya's autonomy.[\[21\]](#) In a 1998 interview, Ibn al-Khattab said, "We were asked by the civil and military leadership and the president to train the people because nobody was convinced the Russians would completely withdraw."[\[22\]](#) The Chechen government formed upon the 1996 Russian withdrawal welcomed Ibn al-Khattab's continued presence, even reportedly bestowing a medal on him for heroism in the battle for Grozny.[\[23\]](#)

Catalyzing Chechen Terrorism

Ibn al-Khattab's contribution to the Chechen campaign went beyond his 1995 and 1996 military contribution. He emphasized the value of propaganda and released dozens of tapes both to frame the Chechen fight as part of a global jihad and to describe the plights of the Chechens and the endeavors of the mujahideen. These tapes were distributed throughout a network of mosques and constituted an unparalleled recruiting tool. Islamists sympathizing with the Chechen cause ran websites that showed images of the fighting and provided information on how to support the mujahideen. Two of the best-known sites[\[24\]](#) were operated by Babar Ahmad, a British national arrested in London in August 2004 on a U.S. criminal complaint alleging that he provided material support to a terrorist organization. Among the disclosures in the filing were e-mails linked to the October 23, 2002 seizure of Moscow's Dubrovka Theater, which led to the deaths of 160 men, women, and children.[\[25\]](#)

Russian intelligence reports and Islamist propaganda videos, many of which are still available in bookstores in Europe and the Middle East, suggested that Ibn al-Khattab established several military training and religious indoctrination camps. In the three years of calm before the outbreak of renewed conflict in Chechnya, Ibn al-Khattab tightened his relation with key Chechen commanders such as Shamil Basayev,[\[26\]](#) with whom he set up a training camp in the village of Serzhen-Yurt.[\[27\]](#) In 1998, Ibn al-Khattab and Basayev created the Islamic International Peacekeeping Brigade, which consisted of Chechens, Arabs, and other foreign fighters. The Islamic International Peacekeeping Brigade is one of the three Chechen groups that the U.S. State Department lists as terrorist organizations for its involvement in the Dubrovka theater siege.[\[28\]](#)

The mujahideen used the pause in hostilities to prepare for the next attack on Russian forces. In September 1999, suspected Chechen and Dagestani terrorists blew up apartment buildings in Moscow and in the southern Russian city of Volgograd, killing 217 people.[\[29\]](#) While Ibn al-Khattab denied responsibility for the theater attack,[\[30\]](#) an armed Chechen incursion into the neighboring Russian republic of Dagestan proved to be the last straw. Moscow, already agitated by mujahideen attempts to impose Islamic law in several Dagestani villages,[\[31\]](#) interpreted the attack as an invasion of Russian territory.

Russian troops poured into Chechnya, launching the second Chechen war, characterized on one hand by indiscriminate Russian attacks and, on the other hand, by terrorist tactics introduced by the foreign jihadists. For example, while no suicide attack took place in Chechnya before 2000,[\[32\]](#) Chechen suicide bombers have struck repeatedly in more recent years. "Black widows," as female Chechen suicide bombers are called, attacked a Moscow rock concert in July 2003,[\[33\]](#) a Moscow subway station the following month,[\[34\]](#) and downed two Russian civilian airliners in September 2004.[\[35\]](#)

Ibn al-Khattab was killed in March 2002, perhaps by a poisoned letter sent by Russian intelligence.[\[36\]](#) His successor was Abu Walid al-Ghamdi, a Saudi who had been in Chechnya since the late 1990s.[\[37\]](#) Abu Walid emphasized terrorism in Russia rather than guerilla warfare in Chechnya. Russia's domestic security agency, the Federalnaya Slozhba Biezopasnosty (FSB) blamed Abu Walid for planning almost all recent suicide bombings in Russia; including the February 2004 Moscow subway bombing that killed more than forty commuters.[\[38\]](#) In April 2004, Russian forces reportedly killed Abu Walid although the circumstances of his death remain unclear.[\[39\]](#)

While the identity of Abu Walid's successor is unclear, foreign jihadists remain active in the region. In April 2003, Colonel Ilya Shabalkin, a spokesman for Russian forces in Chechnya, estimated Arabs to be about one-fifth of Chechnya's roughly 1,000 active fighters, but they comprise the skilled communications core and provide most of the expertise in mine laying.[\[40\]](#)

The migration of jihadists was not one-way. Just as Afghan Arabs traveled to the Caucasus, some Chechens made the opposite trek, traveling to Afghanistan. According to one report, in March 1994, Basayev toured terrorist training camps in the Afghan province of Khost, returning to Chechnya two months later. According to the State Department, several hundred Chechens trained in Al-Qaeda camps in Afghanistan, some fighting there in Al-Qaeda's select military 055 Brigade. In October 1999, emissaries of Basayev and Ibn al-Khattab traveled to Kandahar where bin Laden agreed to provide fighters, equipment, and money to conduct terrorism and aid the fight against Russia. Later that year, bin Laden reportedly sent substantial

sums of money to Basayev, Ibn al-Khattab, and Chechen commander Arbi Barayev to train gunmen, recruit mercenaries, and buy ammunition.[\[41\]](#)

Chechnya's International Islamic Support Network

Ibn al-Khattab built a wide network based upon generous funding. Evidence collected by Russian and U.S. authorities suggests that the same sources that financed Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan also supported Ibn al-Khattab and other Chechen commanders. The FSB has identified Islamic charities operating in Chechnya and elsewhere in the region. Al-Haramain, for example, a Saudi-based charity whose assets in the United States have been frozen by the U.S. Treasury Department,[\[42\]](#) operated for years in Russia and Chechnya, pumping US\$50 million into mujahideen coffers according to Russian intelligence.[\[43\]](#) In 1997, for example, Al-Haramain financed Dagestani extremist formations "of Wahhabist orientation," whose objective was to overthrow the "constitutional order existing in the republic" and create an Islamic state in the territory of Dagestan and Chechnya. The FSB also reported that Al-Haramain sponsored the Foundation for Chechnya, which served as a mechanism to supply the mujahideen.[\[44\]](#) Al-Haramain derived a portion of its funds for Chechen operations from American sources. In February 2005, a federal grand jury indicted the Ashland, Oregon branch of the charity and two top Al-Haramain officers for various money-laundering offences after a lengthy U.S. Internal Revenue Service investigation that uncovered an alleged scheme by officers of the charity to funnel money in support of Chechen jihadists.[\[45\]](#)

The Benevolence International Foundation, a Chicago-based charity, also pumped money to Chechen Islamists. According to a U.S. government affidavit filed in a Chicago court:

In 1995, Madani al-Tayyib (then in the Sudan serving as Al-Qaida's chief financial officer) asked an Al-Qaida member to travel to Chechnya through Baku, Azerbaijan, to join with Al-Qaida in the fighting in Chechnya. The Al-Qaida member ... was told that he would be joining up with Ibn al-Khattab, a mujahideen leader who had worked in Afghanistan with bin Laden. At about this time, a website used by Chechen mujahideen indicated that Ibn al-Khattab led the Arab contingent of fighters in Chechnya. BIF [Benevolence International Foundation] had been identified on the Internet website as conduits for financial support to those fighters.[\[46\]](#)

The U.S. prosecutor's filing detailed how, in the mid-1990s, the Benevolence International Foundation opened an office in Chechnya and worked closely with Sheik Fathi, a Jordanian of Chechen descent, who had fought in Afghanistan. In 1998, Al-Qaeda military commander Sayf al-Islam served as the Benevolence International Foundation officer in Chechnya. The organization's office in Baku kept close contact with the Al-Qaeda cell in Kenya that bombed the U.S. embassy in Nairobi in August 1998.[\[47\]](#) Until its November 2002 U.S. Treasury designation as a terrorism financier,[\[48\]](#) the foundation lent material support to Chechen mujahideen in the form of cash and military equipment. An internal memo written by a foundation employee reveals that Vice Prime Minister of the Cabinet of Ministers Khasan Khazutev "assured to become an effective conduit to pass on the proposed aid, cash ... to the mujahideen."[\[49\]](#)

Front organizations are just one of the means used by terrorists to smuggle cash into Chechnya. Despite their efforts to stop the money coming from abroad, the Russian domestic security agency reports that up to \$1 million a month in remittances from Islamists and the Chechen Diaspora reaches Chechnya, delivered by couriers who travel through Georgia.[\[50\]](#) Donations are often sent to Chechnya through *hawala*, a system used in the Middle East to transfer money informally through a network of couriers and acquaintances, and are, therefore, particularly hard to trace.[\[51\]](#)

Breeding Ground for International Terror

With the loss of their Afghan safe haven, Al-Qaeda operatives scattered. With the help of Islamist charities, many traveled to the Pankisi Gorge,[\[52\]](#) a mountainous area in northern Georgia. In December 2003, for example, an Azeri military court convicted the leaders of Revival of Islamic Heritage, a Kuwaiti humanitarian organization, for sending Azeri recruits to the Pankisi Gorge on their way to fight in Chechnya.[\[53\]](#)

According to Georgian officials, in early 2002, some sixty Arab computer, communications, and financial specialists, military trainers, chemists, and bomb-makers settled in the gorge. The group used sophisticated satellite and encrypted communications to support both Ibn al-Khattab's operations in Chechnya and terrorists planning attacks against Western targets. The "Pankisi Arabs" later tried to buy explosives for what Georgian security officials believe was to have been a major attack on U.S. or other Western installations in Russia.[\[54\]](#)

A 2003 plot involving ricin, a virulent and deadly toxin, demonstrated the Islamist co-option of the Chechen nationalist conflict and its transformation into a global jihadist training ground. According to U.S. intelligence sources cited in the Italian indictment, Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, the Jordanian terrorist alleged to mastermind much of the Iraqi insurgency, dispatched Adnan Muhammad Sadiq (Abu Atiya), a former Al-Qaeda instructor at a Herat, Afghanistan training camp, to Pankisi. In the gorge, Abu Atiya, a Palestinian who had lost a leg during the Chechen war, trained terrorists in the use of toxic gases.[\[55\]](#) He also was behind a 2002 scheme to stage biological and chemical attacks against Russian or American interests in Turkey.[\[56\]](#)

Undeterred by his compromised Turkey plot, in autumn 2002, he tasked a number of Islamist cells from North Africa to travel to Europe to conduct poison and explosive attacks.[\[57\]](#) In December 2002, French authorities arrested four terrorists planning to blow up the Russian embassy in Paris. According to the French Interior Ministry, three of the individuals arrested—Merouane Benahmed, Menad Benchellali, and Noureddine Merabet—had fought alongside Chechen mujahideen and had received training in toxic substances from "high-ranking Al-Qaeda operatives" in the Pankisi camps. The terrorists said they wanted to attack the Russian embassy to avenge Ibn al-Khattab's death.[\[58\]](#)

Information extracted from the detainees in France led investigators to another cell in north London, which possessed a stock of ricin.[\[59\]](#) The ensuing investigation led to raids on London's Finsbury Park mosque,[\[60\]](#) a raid in Manchester during which an Algerian terrorist fatally stabbed a British police officer,[\[61\]](#) and arrests in Spain.[\[62\]](#) The global reach of Al-Qaeda's Chechen cells was demonstrated by the fact that the ricin's manufacture was consistent with descriptions in Al-Qaeda manuals and in a notebook found by Russian Special Forces during a raid of a Chechen rebel base.[\[63\]](#) According to the Kremlin's spokesman for Chechen issues, Sergei Yastrzhembsky,

the ricin investigation showed that Chechnya had become part of a "network of international terrorist organizations."[\[64\]](#)

In April 2002, the U.S. Defense Department created the "Georgia Train and Equip Program" as part of which U.S. Special Forces trained Georgian troops to "enhance ... counterterrorism capabilities and address the situation in the Pankisi Gorge."[\[65\]](#)

The program officially ended in April 2004 with its success unclear. While there have been important arrests of Arab jihadists,[\[66\]](#) the February 2003 declaration of the Georgian State Security Ministry that Al-Qaeda had fled the Pankisi Gorge,[\[67\]](#) was premature. In May 2003, Russian deputy prosecutor general Sergei Fridinsky said that about 700 terrorists still operated in the Pankisi Gorge.[\[68\]](#)

In December 2004, despite sustained operations carried out by Georgian Special Forces, Russian authorities claimed that about 200 Chechen and foreign fighters remained in the Pankisi Gorge and even threatened a preemptive strike inside Georgian territory.[\[69\]](#) The Russian claims, which the Georgian government described as "strange and irresponsible,"[\[70\]](#) appear to be motivated by both genuine concern about the presence of guerrilla fighters on Georgian territory and by Moscow's desire to assert authority over Georgia. While small groups of fighters cross between Chechnya and Georgia, it appears that the Georgian government has been sincere in its efforts to end a massive and constant presence of armed guerrillas on its territory. The Georgians claim that Moscow is using the Pankisi Gorge to threaten them.[\[71\]](#) Such a perception is reinforced by the Russian government's refusal to extend the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's renewal of the Georgia Border Monitoring Operation,[\[72\]](#) which, since December 1999, had stationed neutral observers along the porous border.[\[73\]](#) Unfortunately, Moscow's tendency to conflate corollary geopolitical concerns with its war on terrorism has allowed its detractors to ignore legitimate grievances with regard to Islamist infiltration of Chechen fighters.

Conclusions

Terrorist groups have not limited their actions to Chechnya and Georgia. According to the State Department, Ibn al-Khattab, with Al-Qaeda's financial support, also mobilized mujahideen from Azerbaijan and the Russian republics of Dagestan, Ingushetia, and Ossetia.[\[74\]](#) Moscow is correct in asserting that the Chechen question cannot be contained to the borders of Chechnya. With external financing and subsidized mosques and Islamic schools spreading extremism in areas bordering Chechnya, the spread of Islamism is a real threat.[\[75\]](#) Ibn al-Khattab stated that his goal was "the removal of all Russian presence from the land of Caucasus,"[\[76\]](#) implying that he saw Chechnya as a launching pad for a much wider war. The FSB sees the Chechen fighters "not [as] nationalists or independence-seekers, [but rather as] disciplined international terrorists, united by a single aim: to seize power and bring in a new world order based on Shari'a (Islamic) law."[\[77\]](#) The March 2005 death of Aslan Maskhadov, the circumstances of which are still murky, will probably exacerbate the conflict. With Maskhadov's nationalism out of the way, it will be easier for Basayev and his followers to put a Wahhabi-influenced Islamist stamp on the conflict.

U.S. and European officials are slowly realizing the repercussions of hundreds of battle-hardened jihadis just three hours by plane from Western Europe. In the era of global jihad, terrorists operating in the remote mountains of the Caucasus pose the same threat as a cell operating in the heart of any Western European city. Jean Louis

Bruguière, the French magistrate that conducted the investigation on the Chechnya-trained cell that planned to bomb the Russian embassy in Paris, said after the perpetrators' arrests, "We have some information that the Caucasus at the present time will play a very major role and could be a new Afghanistan."^[78] Western authorities should heed Bruguière's warning. Chechnya may appear a diplomatic and military quagmire, as once did Afghanistan. But the cost of leaving the problem unaddressed can be high. Chechnya may seem half a world away, but distance is no longer a guarantee of immunity from terror.

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