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The Politics of Extremism:
Wahhabism and the Second Chechen War

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Explaining Ethnic Violence

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In early October 1999, Russian tanks rolled back into Chechnya, in what Time magazine called “an amazing act of amnesia.”¹ Only three years earlier, Russian forces had happily withdrawn from the war-torn region after a bloody three-year occupation ostensibly fought over the republic’s right to independence. Pundits and scholars the world over reacted to this new invasion with anger and disappointment, criticizing Putin for reopening old wounds and needlessly continuing the previous struggle. Most observers saw the first war as an unnecessary conflict provoked by political expediency; thus, most onlookers have operated under the assumption that the current conflict draws from the same flimsy premise as the first. But if these two wars truly stem from the same causes, why did the Russian public overwhelmingly support the second invasion, in stark contrast to the first? Why has the Russian media stayed largely silent on the subject of the war, whereas in 1996 it overwhelmingly campaigned for Russian withdrawal? And most importantly, why has the current conflict continued for over three years with no signs of a viable peace? I will argue that despite common wisdom, the second Chechen war is fundamentally different from the first. The devastation of Chechnya’s infrastructure, combined with the expansion of the “global jihad” by fundamentalist mujahadeen, has introduced an extremist Islamic component to the conflict. Rather than simply providing Putin with a convenient scapegoat, the tactics of these Wahhabis have made a serious and legitimate impact on the war. The actions of this small minority, coupled with the overreactions of the Russian military, have succeeded in polarizing both sides, finally securing the elusive popular support for the war aims.

As the fighting continues and chances for peace steadily dwindle, it is important to recognize the underlying dynamic of religious extremism and its affect on the potential

¹ Paul Quinn-Judge, “Back into the Inferno,” Time Magazine (October 11, 1999).
of a ceasefire. Russia’s current situation—a country struggling to respond to guerilla, cross-border attacks—may be all too familiar in coming years. In this paper, I will first lay out the commonly-given arguments for civil wars in general, and Chechnya in particular, and explain why they do not fully explain the current situation. Next, I will attempt to show how the growth of Islamic extremism in Chechnya has fundamentally altered the current conflict from a political war of succession to a stalemated war of mutually-exclusive aims.

Common Interpretations of the Chechen Crisis

Two major competing explanations have attempted to account for the current elusiveness of peace in Chechnya. The first is the often-cited ancient ethnic hatreds explanation. This theory has been embraced by the mass media, and has been persuasively argued by journalists Anatol Lieven (1998, 2002) and Vanora Bennett (1998), as well as historian John Dunlop (1998) to a certain extent. This explanation stresses the fact that Chechnya and Russia have shared a long and violent past. Chechen rebellions were repeatedly put down by the Soviet Union, culminating in a massive deportation of the entire population in 1944 to Central Asia, in which a large segment of the Chechen people perished. According to this theory, these long decades of blood and turmoil instilled in the Chechens a bitter hatred of the Soviet Union. The Chechens, proponents argue, were never fully integrated into the USSR, and were simply biding their time until another opportunity arose to rebel. As such, the 1991 Chechen declaration of independence is viewed as inevitable, and the subsequent wars are seen a continuation of the centuries-old fighting between Russia and the mountainous republic.
However, ethnic grievances cannot fully explain the outbreak of war. As Fearon (1994) notes, every war involves costs for both sides. It seems highly unlikely that preexisting ethnic grievances could be sufficiently strong as to compel two states to plunge into conflict regardless of the price. Compromise is much less costly than war, and indeed, there is strong evidence that whatever the “ancient hatreds,” compromise was possible in Chechnya. It was not necessary for Chechnya to be either completely independent or completely subjugated; Dudaev and Yeltsin could have negotiated a loose association between Grozny and Moscow in the same vein as the agreements between the RF and the other former Soviet republics. In fact, in 1991 the Chechen people overwhelmingly approved Yeltsin and his proposal for varying degrees of autonomy for the Federation’s constituent republics (for more on this, see below). If the conflict between Chechnya and Russia were truly the inevitable result of ancient hatreds, we would expect to see the opposite—a rejection of Yeltsin by the Chechens and an immediate push toward war. Instead, war was delayed three years. This suggests that conflict was not inevitable, and was in fact a conscious choice made by the leaders of the two republics. While ethnic hatreds did exist to some degree, they merely exacerbated a conflict created by other factors.

Perhaps the most popular explanation among scholars is to label the Second Chechen War as “Putin’s War.” Evangelista (2002), Ulrich (2002) and others argue that the conflict in 1999 was started by prime minister Putin as a bid for popular approval in the presidential election, and has continued despite the desires of the public due to the president’s personal grudge against Chechnya and his need to save face. Much is made of Putin’s denigrating remarks toward the Chechens, arguing that the president bears a
deep personal enmity and hatred toward the renegade republic. As such, this view maintains that Putin has doggedly continued the war as a way to satisfy his own personal vendetta, and in an attempt to maintain his pride by finishing what he started. This explanation argues that the Russian public has no wish to continue the war, but that public opinion has little influence in matters of state. This undemocratic behavior is possible, proponents contend, due to Putin’s immense personal popularity and his stranglehold on the media. Despite the unpopularity of the war among the Russian public, Putin has little fear of political backlash.

The simplicity of this explanation is compelling. Not only does it assign all the blame for the current violence to a single actor, but it explains the apparent contradiction between the unpopularity of the current war among the Russian public and the continuing military actions. The Wahhabis, in this theory, are little more than political pawns. Viewed through this lens, Chechnya is seen as a failure of democracy in Russia, and a dire threat for the future of this struggling state.

This explanation, however, fails to account for the complexity of public opinion. It would be difficult to assert that electoral considerations did not play a role in the timing of Putin’s 1999 attack. However, the only reason Putin was able to utilize Chechnya as a political ploy was because of a shift in public opinion since the first war. The bombings and kidnappings propagated by Chechen Islamic radicals incensed the Russian public so much so that when Putin announced his intention to return to war, his popularity shot up from 2 percent in August to 41 percent in November.² The sporadic terrorist attacks have continued throughout the past four years, accompanied by corresponding spikes in public

² M.A Smith, “The Second Chechen War: The All-Russian Context.” In The Second Chechen War, Anne Aldis, ed (The Strategic and Combat Studies Institute, 2000).
approval for the war. For example, in the wake of the October 2002 hostage-taking crisis in a Moscow theater, support for the war leaped from 37 percent to 50 percent.\(^3\) Moreover, despite low approval ratings for Putin's conduct in Chechnya, support for the war's major aims has been consistently high. While an August 20, 2002 poll by Russian news agency ITAR-TASS found that while only 33.3 percent of respondents agreed with the current policies in Chechnya, 90 percent were against negotiations with the militants.\(^4\) This conflict cannot simply be seen as Putin's solitary crusade. The terrorist attacks by Chechnya's new Islamic radicals have given the president the public support he needs to continue the conflict. While the Russian public has often expressed its displeasure for the war's immense casualties, it wholeheartedly supports Putin's aims.

Broader theories of ethnic conflict, similarly, do not adequately explain the current conflict. Fearon (1994) classifies ethnic conflicts as commitment problems, in which majority groups cannot make a credible promise not to exploit minority groups in the future. If the minority group perceives that their chances of victory through armed conflict are decreasing with time, Fearon argues, they have incentives to fight now rather than later. When applied to the first war, this seems to describe the Chechens. First, the collapse of the USSR presented Chechnya with an unprecedented opportunity for a successful rebellion. Furthermore, this opportunity could be seen as decreasing with time, in that the longer the Chechens waited, the better-established and more powerful the Russian Federation would become, making a successful rebellion less and less likely.

Finally, given the history of Russian repression of the Chechen people, it would seem probable that the Chechens would view Russian guarantees with suspicion.

However, these assumptions are not borne out by the evidence. First, given Chechnya’s overwhelming support for Boris Yeltsin in 1991, the Chechen people evidently believed that his promises for autonomy were credible. Had they not viewed them as such, it seems likely that, as Fearon suggests, Grozny would have launched an immediate preventive war. However, the Chechens did not attack the Russian Federation during this “window of opportunity”; in fact, there was a three year gap of half-hearted diplomatic efforts (during which the RF was growing progressively stronger and more stable) before the onslaught of war. And when war began, it was launched by the majority Russians, not the minority Chechens. Applying Fearon’s theory to the second Chechen war is even more difficult. Given the withdrawal of Russian forces in 1996 and the “hands-off” attitude of Yeltsin’s administration, the Chechens had little reason to fear the incredibility of Russian commitments. Had Grozny believed that Moscow was simply biding its time to attack again, it seems unlikely that they would have continued their efforts at reconciliation. In both cases, the majority group can be seen as the instigator of the armed conflict.

Similarly, Posen’s (1993) argument about ethnic war as a security dilemma does not seem to fit the situation in Chechnya. Posen theorizes that the collapse of empires results in situations conducive to arms-buildups and incentives for preemptive strikes, namely the indistinguishability of offense and defense, and windows of vulnerability and opportunity. These factors make it difficult for each group to gauge the other’s motivations. In the uncertain atmosphere of a collapsed empire, each group seeks to
build up arms to ensure its security; these in turn are interpreted as a security threat by the other group, which in turn builds up its arms, and so on and so forth. This argument seems most applicable to newly-emerging states of similar capabilities, rather than to tiny rural Chechnya matched against a large successor-state such as Russia. Despite the uncertainties created by the disintegration of the USSR, the balance of power between Chechnya and Russia was so disproportionate that there was never any confusion as to which state held the military advantage. Furthermore, the fact that Russia commenced the armed conflict in both cases dispels the theory that Chechnya felt it had a “window of opportunity” in which to attack; if Chechnya had felt so threatened, it seems probable that it would have launched preemptive strikes of its own. In this situation, other forces are at play.

Valentino’s (2000) treatment of mass killings also deserves attention. Valentino argues that genocide can best be seen as the inspiration of a small group of leaders, carried out through small numbers of sadists and a great deal of peer pressure. This characterization dovetails neatly with the common scholarly interpretation of the Chechen Wars as the work of the Russian elite, in that it supposes that the motivations and plans for civil wars trickle down from the few to the many. However, this theory falls prey to the same shortcomings as the theory of “Putin’s War”. This explanation fails to account for the widespread public support for the war’s general political aims, on both sides. Unlike the one-sided genocides of Nazi Germany or Rwanda, the conflict in Chechnya is undeniably a two-sided conflict. The fact that Russian soldiers have performed what are undeniably horrible human rights violations should not deter from the fact that there are very real political goals and grievances behind the fighting.
Fearon and Laitin’s (2002) treatise on ethnic war fits the Chechen situation most closely. They argue that ethnic conflict is most likely to occur in states with conditions that favor insurgency: poverty, mountainous terrain, political instability, and large populations. These factors all describe Russia, which has struggled for political and economic stability since the early 1990s. Moreover, Chechnya is indeed an undeniably poor and mountainous region, with many conditions which are conducive to rebellion. Yet while Fearon and Laitin convincingly demonstrate the correlation between these factors and the outbreak of war, they do little to flesh out the mechanism by which these factors might create civil unrest, stating only that, “Where states are relatively weak and capricious, both fears and opportunities encourage the rise of would-be rulers who supply a rough local justice...”

While true, this is a somewhat simplistic model of ethnic war which does not take into account the factors most directly related to war and peace: that is, the motivations and goals of the political actors themselves. While opportunity undoubtedly plays a large role in warfare, it is equally important to note why actors choose to seize, or choose not to seize, these opportunities. For example, it is not enough to say that a rebel group coalesces and attacks a government simply because they become aware of the statistical likelihood of such an attack to succeed. Fearon and Laitin have accurately divined the ingredients for revolution, but their theory does not entirely explain the underlying causes. Nonetheless, this explanation is extremely useful in explaining the conditions in which rebel groups spawn and gain a following, as I will later show in my discussion of the Wahhabis.

Scholarly attention to the second Chechen War has, in truth, been severely lacking. Little debate has risen in the past few years over the failure of peace, with most

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5 Fearon and Laitin, 2.
articles simply blaming the Russian government for continuing the conflict. The reason for the dearth in material, it appears, is the tendency of scholars and the mass media to lump both wars together as a single contiguous conflict. By virtue of identical locations and similar actors, the reasons for violence in 1994 are assumed to be the roots of the current conflict. As I will show, this is an incorrect assumption.

The Beginning and End of the First Chechen War

Most scholars have attributed the outbreak and subsequent resolution of the first Chechen war to the political ambitions of Russian President Boris Yeltsin. At the outbreak of war in 1994, he and Chechen President Dzhokhar Dudaev undeniably held opposing positions; however, neither was so far apart as to make compromise impossible. Rather, President Yeltsin’s need for a quick and morale-boosting war in order to win reelection led him to spurn any and all efforts to negotiate. However, he and his advisors severely underestimated the military prowess of the small republic, and were quickly dragged into a protracted siege, turning political advantage into political nightmare. Unlike the second war, the first conflict was fought over political motivations, and when these motivations ceased to exist, so did the war.

That there was room for compromise can clearly be seen in the Chechen political stance. Whatever Dudaev’s rhetoric, the Chechen people were not fervently obsessed with unequivocal and complete autonomy. While obtaining recognition of Chechnya’s sovereignty was a primary goal for most nationalists, this goal did not necessitate violently severing all ties with Russia. In an attempt to hold onto its disparate territories, Russia was prepared to become a federation in which its republics would exercise
varying degrees of autonomy. Boris Yeltsin said as much in his 1991 presidential
election, and this sentiment earned him 80% of the Chechen vote—a much higher
percentage than the national average.6 Similarly, when Dudaev abruptly seized power in
September of 1991 and declared Chechnya’s independence, his actions were protested by
ten nationalist organizations.7 Throughout the next several years, Dudaev made
numerous overtures to Yeltsin which might have averted war, but all were rebuffed.
Historian John Dunlop explains, “… the cornerstone of the Yeltsin-Shakhrai strategy for
managing the Chechen crisis was to avoid all personal contact with Dudaev.”8

Why did Yeltsin turn from his previous stance and adopt such an antagonistic
attitude toward Dudaev? As scholar Matthew Evangelista notes, it is certainly true that
“Dudaev… would have been far from an ideal negotiating partner,” and it is undeniable
that his often inflammatory actions and words rightly galled and irritated Yeltsin.9
However, this hardly seems a good motivation for warfare. Rather, there is considerable
evidence that many prominent hawks within the Russian government viewed a possible
Chechen intervention as “a small and triumphant war” which would bolster Yeltsin’s
chances for reelection.10 Chechnya was seen as a tiny and rather backward republic
which would prove to be no great challenge for the military, conveniently omitting the
long and bloody struggle the USSR had fought to tame the region to its will. As a result,
Yeltsin made no serious attempts to negotiate with Dudaev. On December 11, 1994,
Russian forces moved into Chechnya.

6 John B. Dunlop, Russia Confronts Chechnya: Roots of a Separatist Conflict, (Cambridge
University Press, 1998), 96.
7 Matthew Evangelista, The Chechen Wars: Will Russia Go the Way of the Soviet Union?
8 Dunlop, 184.
9 Evangelista, 29.
Yeltsin and his advisors had severely miscalculated. The war was neither painless nor popular: it was brutal, bloody and generally hated by the Russian public. Just in time for the 1996 presidential elections, and just after the assassination of President Dudaev by the Russian secret service, Yeltsin made his first serious overtures for peace. His last remaining hopes of a decisive Russian military victory were quashed by the August assault on Grozny by Chechen freedom fighters, and the Russian military’s subsequent costly and bloody reprisal. Facing widespread public backlash, Yeltsin at last acknowledged the necessity of extricating himself from the situation and ordered the withdrawal of troops.

The Khasavyurt Peace Accords left many issues unresolved, but met with widespread public approval. However, in the wake of Russia’s bloody assault, a new political force was rapidly gaining support in Chechnya, one which would fundamentally rewrite the basis of the conflict.

The Rise of the Wahhabis

By 1996, Chechnya was in shambles. Its infrastructure was completely destroyed, with no methods for rebuilding. The newly-elected president, Aslan Maskhakov, was unsuccessful at improving social conditions or containing the general lawlessness in the region. In 1998, Russian statesman Ivan Rybkin was quoted as saying that 100% of Chechnya’s youth was unemployed, along with 80% of its men, and they possessed
90,000 guns.\textsuperscript{11} By 1999, over 1,300 Russians, Dagestanis or Ingush had been victims of Chechen violence, kidnappings or murder.\textsuperscript{12}

Into this condition of anarchy came Wahhabism, a fundamentalist form of Sunni Islam imported from Saudi Arabia. Missionaries from throughout the Arab world had flooded into Chechnya in the 1990s, seeing a fertile ground for their teachings.\textsuperscript{13} Moreover, radical mujahadeen ("Holy Warriors" who had fought the Soviets in Afghanistan) had flocked to Chechnya during the first war in order to aid what they saw as an Islamic crusade against the Russians. Their strict version of Islam began to gain a wide following for two major reasons. First, Wahhabism’s tightly regimented moral code held great appeal to those frustrated with the corruption and lawlessness rampant throughout Chechnya. As Miriam Lansky writes, Wahhabism “offered a solution to the prevailing social chaos, criminality, and economic deprivation of the post-Soviet life.”\textsuperscript{14} Wahhabism provided Chechens, especially disillusioned young men, with a sense of purpose and a “spiritual refuge.”\textsuperscript{15} Secondly, the Wahhabis had something Maskhadov did not: money. The Wahhabis are heavily financed by networks throughout the Middle East, including Bin-Laden’s al Quaeda. In many places, they built mosques and offered scholarships to locals.\textsuperscript{16} Moreover, those willing to join their movement reaped great rewards. Youths could earn on average 100-300 USD a month through service as a mujahadeen, a rarity in a society in which the shattered infrastructure provided few with a

\textsuperscript{11} Anna Matveena, \textit{The North Caucasus: Russia’s Fragile Borderland} (London: The Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1999), 57.
\textsuperscript{12} Seely, 305.
\textsuperscript{13} “Russia and Islam,” \textit{The Economist}, Vol. 353, No. 8140 (October 9-15th, 1999), 25.
\textsuperscript{15} “Russia and Islam,” 25.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
steady income. While Wahhabism’s contradictory approach to Chechnya’s traditional Sufi Islam kept it from winning widespread public approval, the sect nevertheless established a firm foothold in the wake of the first war’s devastation.

The Impact of Wahhabism

While Wahhabism has attracted a small minority of the Chechen population (approximately 10%), its followers have asserted a disproportionate influence on the region’s politics. By capitalizing on Maskhadov’s weak regime, they have put themselves in a position to dictate Chechen policies, and by doing so, dictate the reactions of Russia to the Chechen people.

First, the Wahhabis have maneuvered around President Maskhadov to establish effective control over the state. In an attempt to broaden his power base, President Maskhadov appointed his political opponents Shamil’ Basaev, Movladi Udogov, and Zelimkhan Iandarbiev to important positions within the state. However, all three adopted pro-Wahhabi positions and began to criticize Maskhadov’s attempts at accords with Russia. They found an ally in Ibn-ul-Khattab, a near-legendary leader of the international mujahadeen in Chechnya. In April of 1998, Khattab and Basaev joined to form the Congress of Peoples of Chechnya and Dagestan, an organization with the avowed purpose of uniting the two regions into an Islamic confederation. By February of 1999, President Maskhadov was so desperate that he gave in to Basaev’s demand to dissolve the Chechen parliament and implement Shariah law across Chechnya. While this act was deemed unconstitutional, it did lead to the foundation of an Islamic ruling council called

the Shura, headed by Basaev, which took on most of the legal and judicial functions of
the state.

At a local level, the Wahhabis have been extremely successful at removing their
opposition, either through coercion or overt violence. Moderate Chechen leaders live in
fear; Grozny estimates that since 1999, perhaps 230 religious and local governmental
leaders have been assassinated by Wahhabi militants for moderate attitudes toward
Russia.\textsuperscript{18} Despite widespread hostility toward the movement, Grozny has been unable to
muster the resources to mount a successful opposition to the heavily-financed, highly-
motivated organization. Peter Bouckaert of the Human Rights watch reports that in many
cases, the armed militants have taken over heavily-populated civilian areas, despite
protests from locals.\textsuperscript{19} For all extents and purposes, the actions and stance of the
Chechen state have become those of the Wahhabis.

In fact, the conflict in Chechnya can be seen as two simultaneous but disparate
wars—the war between the Russians and the Chechens/Wahhabis, and the war of the
Wahhabis against the Chechen state. The factors in Fearon and Laitin (2003) resonate
strongly with the situation in Chechnya. After the first Chechen war, Chechnya was
extremely poor, with a very weak central government, a large rural population, and rough
terrain which provided strongholds for the mujahadeen. In addition, the mujahadeen
were strongly supported by the international radical Muslim community, receiving both
money and equipment. As Fearon and Laitin's research predicts, Chechnya was the
perfect breeding ground for an insurgent movement, and it is extremely likely that

\textsuperscript{18} Dudaev.
\textsuperscript{19} Peter Bouckaert, Human Rights Watch, "Hearing Before the Committee on Foreign
without the presence of these factors, the Wahhabis would never have been more than a passing phenomenon.

However, the Wahhabis have not only largely taken control of Chechnya, but through their terrorist actions, have dictated the Russian response to the Chechen people. Beginning in 1997, Islamic radicals began a series of high-profile kidnappings of Western aid workers, Russian diplomats, and journalists, which Moscow blamed on the powerless Maskhadov. Journalist Anatol Lieven estimates that between 1996 and 1999, over 1,100 Russian citizens were kidnapped by Chechen gangs, and in many cases brutally tortured.\textsuperscript{20} In August of 1999, Basaev, Khattab, and a group of approximately 2,000 Chechen radicals invaded Dagestan, ostensibly at the request of the local people, to set up an Islamic republic. During the next two months, four separate bombings attributed to Wahhabis killed 314 Russians, 212 of them in Moscow itself.\textsuperscript{21} It was these actions which spurred Putin’s decision to recommence war in the troubled region. A long string of terrorist attacks has continued, keeping the Russian public invested in the war. September 2000 bombings in Moscow, the October 2002 Moscow theater crisis, the December 2002 suicide bombing of the pro-Russian government in Grozny… The list goes on. Many of the attacks were aimed at Russian citizens, others at pro-Moscow Chechens who the radicals perceived as betraying their agenda. Regardless, each violent action has succeeded in provoking violent responses from the Russian military, often at the expense of innocent Chechen civilians.

It is difficult to ascertain to what degree the Wahhabis are working toward a single concerted political agenda, or how much they are aware of their impact on Russian

\textsuperscript{21} Seely, 307.
politics. However, given repeated Wahhabi harassment and murder of moderate Chechen politicians, and the high-profile terrorist attacks on Russian citizens, it seems clear that they are bent on preventing any and all compromise with Moscow. It also seems probable that the Wahhabis are aware of their power to derail peace by creating an environment of fear and anger in which compromise is no longer possible.

Radicalization and Polarization

In response to the Wahhabi movement and the ensuing violence, both Chechnya and Russia have experienced what scholar James Hughes calls “dual radicalization.” The first Chechen war was fought over political aims, and as such, had high potential for a compromise (in which, for example, Chechnya could be granted some degree of autonomy but remain in association with Russia: in effect, the result of the 1996 Khasavyurt Peace Accords). However, the wave of Islamic extremism in Chechnya has shifted the war aims of both parties to mutually-exclusive stances. For the Wahhabis, nothing short of a complete Russian withdrawal from the region is acceptable. For the Russians, incensed by terrorist attacks and kidnappings, this is the one demand to which they cannot agree.

The change in Grozny is readily apparent. Whereas the early rhetoric was largely political, now it resounds with religious and ideological overtones. General Dudaev was little more than a casual Muslim, once incorrectly directing the Chechen citizens to pray three times, rather than five times, a day.\(^{22}\) However, the Wahhabis have forced Chechnya’s more moderate leaders to shift to the right in order to survive. For example,

President Maskhadov recently urged religious leaders to band together "to defend the
[country’s] sovereignty and integrity in the name of Allah the benevolent and merciful."23
Regardless of whatever sect they espouse, Islam has become the rallying point for the
Chechen people, a symbol of their unification and their opposition to Moscow. The
abrupt, almost overnight transformation of Chechen freedom fighters into mujahadeen is
described by journalist Thomas de Waal: "Fighters, many of whom had been drinking
vodka a few years before, wound green Islamic headbands around their heads and learned
how to pray."24

Implicit in this changed dialogue is a new aim for the ongoing conflict. Galina
Yemelianova explains that jihad is a central facet of Wahhabism, in sharp contrast to
Chechnya’s traditional Sufism.

Wahhabis believe that jihad also implies a campaign to spread Islam all over the
world. Moreover, Wahhabi radicals view the jihad as a preventive armed advance
in order to overcome those obstacles which the enemies of Islam place in the path
of its peaceful proliferation.25

The first Chechen war was fought over political ends; the second is being fought over the
Wahhabis’ desire to create one united Islamic North Caucasian republic. While the goals
of the first war allowed for compromise, those of the second reject any and all Russian
influence in Chechnya. This is a necessary part of Wahhabi rhetoric, as it is this hardline
fundamentalism which keeps recruits joining their movement. By emphasizing the
Chechen identity as a separate Muslim people and appealing to an idealistic religious
goal, the Wahhabis earn legitimacy in the eyes of many disenchanted youth.

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24 de Waal.
Papers, Vol. 29, No. 4 (December 2001, 677.)
Compromising with the Russians would not only be counter to the entire Wahhabi movement, but likely cost them their following and their power.

Radicalization in Russia has largely taken the form of widespread demonization of the Chechen people following the terrorist attacks and kidnappings. Long viewed by as a somewhat inferior, “non-Russian” ethnic group, Chechens are now commonly stereotyped in the Russian media as “bandits” and “terrorists.” The actions and viewpoints of the Wahhabis have been represented by the press as those of Chechens at large. Front page articles, headlined in Arabic-style fonts, play up the role of Islamic fundamentalism and further increase the distance between the Russian public and “the terrorists.”

Putin himself has taken things to an entirely new level with his vulgar and derogatory statements about the renegade region. In September of 1999, he said that Russian forces would “be following terrorists everywhere. If we catch them in a toilet, then we will bury them in their own crap.” Later, he referred to the operation as something that should be done “with clenched teeth, strangle the vermin at the root.”

Derisive, dehumanizing remarks with reference to the Chechen fighters have become a common occurrence by some of Russia’s leading political and military figures. That this is having some effect on the average Russian citizen can be seen in the polls. In September 2000, only 15 per cent of Russians thought that the Chechens were fighting for independence; 35 per cent attributed the conflict to money, 22 per cent to revenge, and 16 per cent to the Chechen’s inherently aggressive nature.

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27 Smith, 8.
29 Russell, 88.
In short, the presence of the Wahhabis in Chechnya has resulted in radicalization and demonization on both sides. This, culminating with the changed war aims introduced by the Wahhabis, has twisted the second Chechen war into a polarized conflict in which compromise seems highly unlikely, if not impossible.

**Implications**

Whatever the provocations, it seems clear that Moscow’s heavy-handed approach to the Chechen crisis will not result in any sort of lasting peace. In fact, with every bombing campaign, the Russian forces reduce the chances for a cease fire. By killing innocent Chechen civilians and destroying what little infrastructure and resources the region has left, Moscow increases the appeal of Wahhabism and drives Chechnya’s disillusioned, unemployed youth further into extremism. This, in turn increases the likelihood of violent terrorist attacks such as the disastrous October 2002 hostage-taking. These attacks incense the Russian public and military, and provoke further retaliation, continuing the chain of violence.

How can this vicious cycle be broken? Moscow’s solution has been to hunt down Wahhabi leaders such as Basaev and Khattab with single-minded purpose. However, while these leaders certainly play a large role in the mujahadeen community, there is little evidence that killing them will derail the movement. In fact, the assassination of both Basaev and Khattab has slowed the Wahhabis only negligibly. It seems far more likely that what Moscow will accomplish is the creation of martyrs, which will further spur the movement forward.
Ironically, what Chechnya needs more than anything is money, something that Russia desperately lacks. The best way to deal with the Wahhabis is to strike at the underlying causes of the movement’s success: not charismatic leaders, although they have played a role, but poverty and lawlessness. If Russian forces entered cities and rebuilt them, rather than shelling them, the appeal of Wahhabism would diminish. This movement has sprung up in anarchy and destitution; under organization and industry, it will wither and die.

As such, Russia should commit itself to simultaneously scaling back its military operations in Chechnya and rebuilding the region’s devastated infrastructure. Through its clumsy and brutal bombing campaign, Moscow has lost what little credibility it had with the Chechen people. By making a concerted effort to remedy the damage wrought by Russian forces, it seems possible that Moscow can encourage the development of a non-radical Chechen military force which could cooperate with the Russian forces in rooting out the last of the terrorists. The Wahhabis are a common enemy to both Grozny and Moscow; it is high time both governments began acting like it.

Conclusion

The dichotomy between the first and second Chechen wars remains a troubling quandary for international and domestic observers. Proponents of peace have been faced with an increasingly polarized citizen body, a redoubling of terrorist attacks, and progressively dimmer prospects for a cease fire. The remedies which halted the first war, namely popular dissent and massive casualties, have done little to faze the Russian president this time around. The explanation for this phenomenon lies not in ancient
ethnic hatreds, nor in the political elite. Rather, it is the result of an insurgent Islamic radical movement which has fundamentally altered the attitudes and aims of both warring parties. The second war is a beast wholly unlike the first; it is no surprise that it has continued to rampage out of control despite the clumsy efforts of onlookers.

In less than five years, the presence of a fundamentalist Islamic sect has revolutionized the Russo-Chechen political landscape. The Wahhabis have created an environment of hate and extremism in which the possibility of compromise has all but diminished to nothing. Whatever the culpability of President Putin in prolonging the war, Wahhabite terrorism remains the key factor to securing public support for the conflict and alienating the moderates in both republics. So long as the Wahhabis are political actors in Chechnya, peace will remain elusive.

Why care about Chechnya? Many in the international community have chosen to take a distant stance on the Chechen conflict, dismissing it as a mere internal struggle. However, the ease with which the Wahhabis gained ground in Chechnya should alarm even the most pacifistic nation. As proven by the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan and the events of September 11, the allure and power of Islamic fundamentalism is growing. In Chechnya, a veritable handful of extremists have succeeded in provoking one of the most violent and inhumane responses seen in modern history from what is supposedly a developed, advanced nation. Scholars and statesmen alike would be wise to study and understand Chechnya, as it may soon be a test-case for future struggles across the globe.
Works Cited


