

IN SEARCH OF GREATER MONSTERS TO SLAY: EXPLORING THE  
MOTIVATIONS OF CHECHEN FOREIGN FIGHTERS IN SYRIA AND IRAQ  
FIGHTING FOR THE ISLAMIC STATE

by

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A Thesis  
Submitted to the  
Graduate Faculty  
of  
George Mason University  
in Partial Fulfillment of  
The Requirements for the Degree  
of  
Master of Science  
Conflict Analysis and Resolution

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A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of  
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Spring Semester 2018  
George Mason University  
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## **DEDICATION**

This is dedicated to everyone I had to turn down because “I’m busy. I have a thesis to write, you know.” I can do stuff again. Call me.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to thank the many friends, relatives, and supporters who have made this happen, especially my friends Sofia Bachman and Rob Bruner. The final product that you are reading would not have reached this stage without their diligent work.

I would also like to thank Alex Tiersky of the U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, also known as the U.S. Helsinki Commission, for his help and guidance in shaping the section on policy recommendations.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Caucasus Emirate.....	CE
<i>Imirate Kavkaz</i> .....	IK
Islamic State.....	IS
<i>Islamskoe Gosydarstvo Iraka i Shama</i> .....	IGISh
Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe.....	OSCE
“Chechens in Syria” (blog).....	CiS
Jaish al-Muhajireen wa’l-Ansar.....	JMA
Middle East and Northern Africa (region).....	MENA
United Kingdom.....	UK
United States.....	US
Autonomous Soviet Social Republic.....	ASSR
Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.....	USSR

## **ABSTRACT**

### **IN SEARCH OF GREATER MONSTERS TO SLAY: EXPLORING THE MOTIVATIONS OF CHECHEN FOREIGN FIGHTERS IN SYRIA AND IRAQ FIGHTING FOR THE ISLAMIC STATE**

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George Mason University, 2018

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This thesis considers the wave of insurgents who left Chechnya in order to fight with the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. The purpose of this study is to examine the motivations of these fighters. Stories describing their departure—including journalistic retellings, third-party recollections and self-stated motivation—collected on the blog, *Chechens in Syria*, compiled by Joanna Paraszczuk, is the data used for this thesis. These motivations are coded and analyzed for patterns and themes. What is extracted from these blog posts is useful for understanding the conflict in Chechnya and speaks more broadly to the state of jihadism within the region. Additionally, secondary sources and a deep literature review of foreign fighters, the ideology of the Islamic State, the conflict between Russia and Chechnya, provide further insights and complement the analysis provided.

## INTRODUCTION

The Caucasus Emirate (CE) was the main body of jihadism within Chechnya and the broader North Caucasus for years. However, over the years, the organization has considerably lost the capability to act within its base of operations due to a combined effort between Russian special forces and the president of the Chechen Republic, Ramzan Kadyrov. Special forces have targeted the CE's leadership and Kadyrov has gone after individuals who even *imply* sympathy to the Salafist movement and their families. Additionally, he has implemented a number of political, social and religious initiatives to rob the CE of their legitimacy and relevancy among the civilian Chechen population. The number of attacks attempted by the group and their lethality as well as membership numbers have dropped significantly from 2010 to the present day. It has dropped so that many have wondered if the Caucasus Emirate was, in fact, dead.

However, the outbreak of civil war in Syria alongside the rise of the Islamic State (IS) has demonstrated that, while the CE might be handicapped, the discourse and frameworks that gave birth to it have not faded. Sentiment for fighting the *jihad* continues to linger among the insurgents, and thus, a noted 400 Chechens went to Syria to continue their duty as "holy warriors" or *mujahideen*. Which raises the overriding question this study seeks to answer: *Why are Chechens going to fight for IS in Iraq and Syria?*

Chapter 1 discusses the phenomenon of foreign fighters in broad, general terms. The sheer numbers of foreigners that IS was able to recruit returned much needed attention to this phenomenon. It also discusses the urgency of studying this movement, especially within the Chechen context. The number of fighters presents a conundrum to Chechnya and to Russia: What would happen to these fighters after the battle is over, or when they decide that they have had their fill of combat? Should they return home, governments now have a volatile combination of shell-shocked, trained and radicalized individuals, who might do harm on their own soil.

Chapter 2 accomplishes two goals. It takes into account the movement known as *jihadism* (and explains why this thesis employs such a problematic and controversial term). It also delves into the backstory of the Chechen insurgency. How did people of a traditionally Sufi country come to embrace the traditionalist and violent message of the jihadists? Sufism is so far removed from the sphere of radicalism that it has been tapped by some as a potential antidote to the passions of jihadism in Pakistan, Algeria, the United Kingdom and United States.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, understanding how Salafism came to Chechnya and why it resonated with so many people helps to clarify how the shift in dynamics of the Russo-Chechen conflict occurred. It also sheds some light on why it has lingered, and thus, why groups like the Islamic State can pluck that discursive thread with effect.

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<sup>1</sup> Fait Muedini, "The Promotion of Sufism in the West: Britain and the United States," in *Sponsoring Sufism: How Governments Promote "Mystical Islam" in Their Domestic and Foreign Policies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 153.

Chapter 3 explores this question through the gathering and examination of motivations as told by Chechen fighters themselves as compiled by independent journalist Joanna Paraszczuk and her blog, *Chechens in Syria*. The blog is a compendium of translated Russian articles and jihadi propaganda about Russian-speaking units in Iraq and Syria. Using Grounded Theory, these motivations will be sifted through for common themes in order to build to a more cohesive narrative of why Chechens are in Syria and Iraq.

Chapter 4 provides conclusions, spaces for further study and policy recommendations for Russia, the United States (as this study was written by an American and conducted in the U.S., such recommendations seem appropriate) and the international community, namely international organizations such as the United Nations and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). It concludes with an exercise in reflective practice: a reflection on what has been revealed and where the author finds themselves within it.

Supplementary material will be provided in three Appendices. Appendix A explores Chechen society and its relationship with Russia, including a consideration on 18th century Islamic movements of independence and the Deportation of 1944. Appendix B recalls details of First and Second Chechen Wars. Appendix C is the “Chechens in Syria” Codebook.

## CHAPTER ONE: FOREIGN FIGHTERS

Individuals traveling from one country to fight in conflicts abroad, not involving their home country is not a new phenomenon, even within the modern jihadist movement. In his book *Jihad Joe: Americans Who Go to War in the Name of Islam*, J.M. Berger chronicles the tales of American “foreign fighters” who traveled to assist the Afghan fight off the Soviets in the 1980s and the Bosniaks against the Serbians in the 1990s.<sup>2</sup> However, despite its dominance in the headlines, the very idea of “foreign fighting,” the act of an individual traveling to fight as a non-state actor in solidarity with a population they have otherwise no connection with, is a complex one. For instance, the notion of “foreign” is muddled in arguments presented by Barak Mendelsohn, pointing out that the very idea of “foreignness” is incredibly subjective and could include an individual from the next village.<sup>3</sup>

### **Why Fight Abroad?**

While some of the earliest documentation of foreign fighting stretches into the Spanish Civil War, as with most research questions surrounding the tawdry and the illegal, it is difficult to gather strong empirical data supporting many claims.<sup>4</sup> What

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<sup>2</sup> J.M. Berger, *Jihad Joe: Americans Who Go to War in the Name of Islam* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, Inc., 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Barak Mendelsohn, “Foreign Fighters—Recent Trends” *Orbis* 55, no. 2 (2011): 192, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orbis.2011.01.002>.

<sup>4</sup> David Malet, “Why Foreign Fighters?” *Orbis* 54, no. 1 (2010): 102, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orbis.2009.10.007>.

research has been done by Malet, Byman and Hegghammer seems to suggest that foreign fighters are compelled into their conflicts by some component of the conflict itself.<sup>5</sup> In other words, there is some abstract ideal rooted in the conflict “far away” that draws them in, rather than any concrete need.

Frameworks and Framing Theory are not only a useful way of understanding the movements of radicalization writ large, but in understanding why a potential recruit might elect to join an insurgency far from home. Anja Dalgaard-Nielsen, who introduced this idea to Social Movement Theory, stated that frameworks are a “recursive process in which the movement’s idea entrepreneurs attempt to frame messages in ways that will best resonate with the interests, attitudes, and beliefs of its potential constituency.”<sup>6</sup> The frameworks presented by a recruiter might be of particular resonance to a member of a diaspora community, because the recruiter makes appeals to the individual’s sense of ethnicity, community and safety.<sup>7</sup>

David Malet’s seminal book, *Foreign Fighters: Transnational Identity in Civil Conflicts*, notes that recruiters know this and frame their arguments as an obligation wherein the foreign individual is “likely to eventually face greater losses if their cohort loses the war.”<sup>8</sup> In other words, it is constructed that if the insurgency does not defeat

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid; Hegghammer, “Should I Stay or Should I Go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists’ Choice between Domestic and Foreign Fighting?” *American Political Science Review* 107, no. 1 (Feb. 2013), <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055412000615>; Daniel Byman and Jeremy Shapiro, *Be Afraid. Be A Little Afraid: The Threat of Terrorism from Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institute, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> Randy Borum, “Radicalization into Violent Extremism I: A Review of Social Science Theories” *Journal of Strategic Security* 4, no. 4 (2011): 18, <http://dx.doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.4.4.2>.

<sup>7</sup> Malet, “Why Foreign Fighters?” 100; Hegghammer, “Should I Stay,” 1

<sup>8</sup> David Malet, *Foreign Fighters Transnational Identity in Civil Conflicts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013): 32.



their purported enemy at home then they, the individual, will perish as well sometime in the future. Malet also suggests that an individual's social ties to the conflict are significant in a fighter's decision to travel. A recruiter is far more likely to dip into their own social network than to seek outsiders.<sup>9</sup> This reinforces the obligation to the community, because in the instance of the veritable diaspora member, the member is not only beholden to their ethnicity in the broad, philosophical sense, but by someone they know personally.

Thomas Hegghammer of the Norwegian Defense Research Establishment builds upon Malet's argument, which is constructed on a more universal level, by examining jihadists specifically. Like other foreign fighters, jihadists are compelled to cross borders due to an abstract idea, that of an obligation to serve, and in the case of the Islamic State, to help build and sustain the caliphate. Hegghammer also notes that in many cases, foreign theaters are seen as more legitimate, because there is less of a chance to injure or kill someone they know.<sup>10</sup> Distant lands and wars are also painted by recruiters in shades of romance.<sup>11</sup> The conclusions that both Malet and Hegghammer draw reflect the assumption that fighters risk themselves to be killed for their "passions."<sup>12</sup>

Loftier ideals may pull a person across borders, but the question remains in the context of the Chechen situation—what is compelling *Chechens* specifically to fight in

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Hegghammer "Should I Stay," 7.

<sup>11</sup> Erik Pruyt, Stefano Armenia, Georgios Tsaples, Riccardo Onori, and Arije Antinori, "Fighting Foreign Fighters: But What about Wannabe and Returning Foreign Fighters?" Paper presented at the 2015 Social Dynamics Society Conference in Cambridge, MA, 2005.

<https://www.systemdynamics.org/assets/conferences/2015/proceed/papers/P1094.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> Malet, *Foreign Fighters*, 26.

Syria? There is already a jihadist unit that exists and is active in the Caucasus. It does not purport to build a “caliphate,” but the more modest goals of an “emirate.” The “emirate,” much like the “caliphate,” has a real historic place in the Chechen discourse that can be pointed to as guidance and for inspiration. What has superseded these stories and these goals and compelled these fighters out of the Caucasus and through the long and arduous journey—some 970 miles—to Syria?<sup>13</sup>

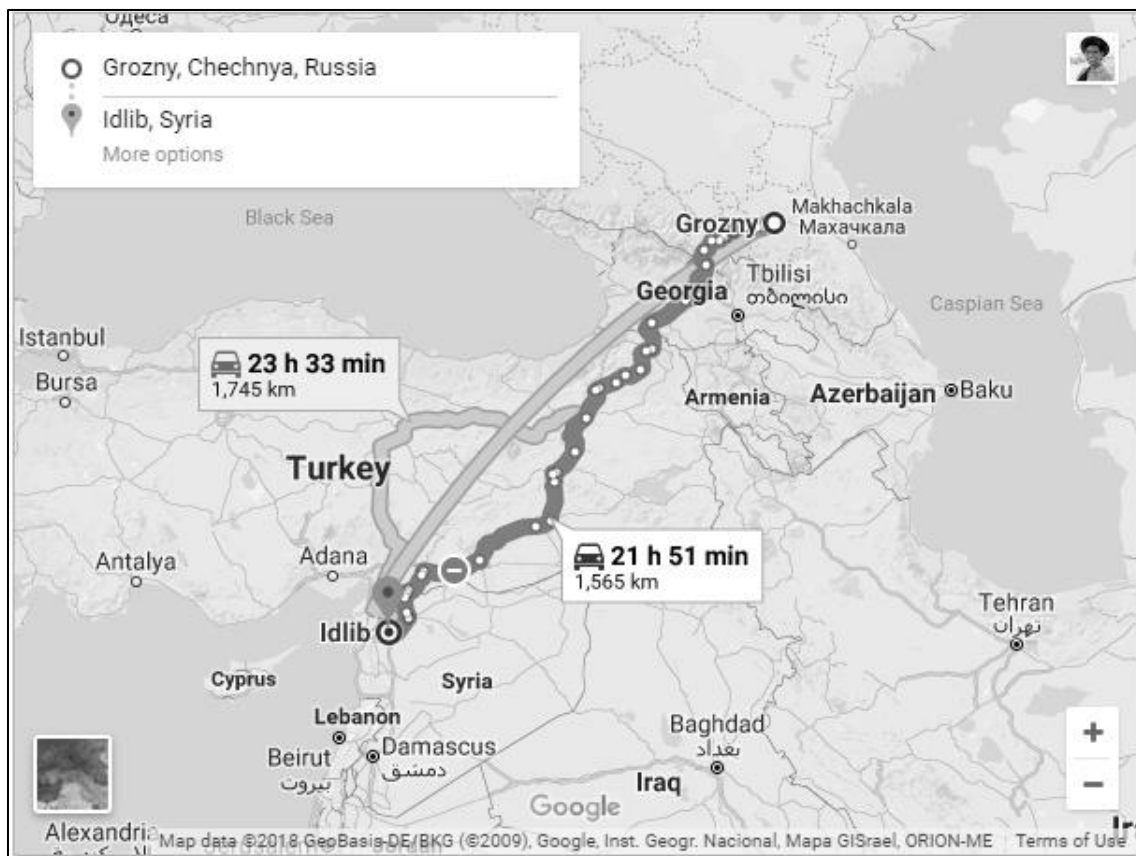


Figure 1 Map from Grozny to Idlib (Google)

<sup>13</sup> This number assumes the journey is from Grozny, Russia to Idlib, Syria.

### What is the concern about foreign fighters?

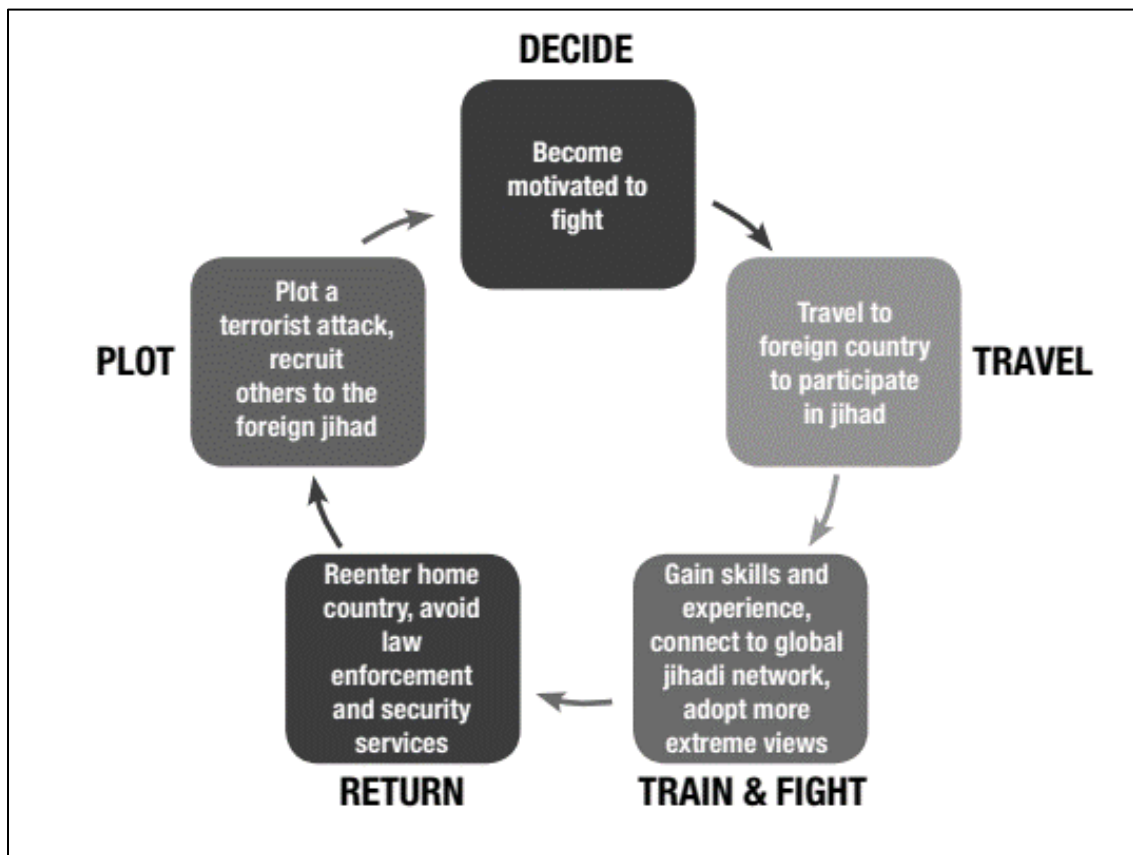


Figure 2 The Foreign Fighter Cycle, from Byman and Shapiro, *Be Afraid*.

Foreign fighters are of interest for academia and policymakers because of the unique challenge that they pose. First and foremost, it has been observed and reported that foreign fighters tend to make their engagements more combustible. This is due to the fact that foreign fighters tend to be more violent than their peers; that which propels someone to make dangerous journeys seems to provide more passions to combust.<sup>14</sup> But

<sup>14</sup> Malet, "Why Foreign Fighters?", 112.

what happens when the conflict is over—either when battles have formally ceased, or when the fighter stops fighting—is most pertinent.

According to the model drawn by Daniel Byman and Jeremy Shapiro of the Brookings Institution (Figure 1), insurgents return home after the war and in some cases, engage in terrorist activities.<sup>15</sup> Those attacks with foreign fighters at the helm tend to be more successfully implemented and have higher casualty counts.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, due to their credibility, returned foreign fighters have the capacity to be compelling recruiters and inciters of radicalization.<sup>17</sup>

However, Byman and Shapiro also point out that this is not the most frequently tread path by these fighters. In the case of the Soviet-Afghan War, even if they wanted to return home, there was little opportunity to do so; many countries refused to let their fighters return, even if they wanted to.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, Thomas Hegghammer finds that from 1990 to 2010, only one-in-nine insurgents even return home, let alone plan and execute a terror attack there (107 returnees versus 945 foreign fighters).<sup>19</sup> Indeed, of the Europeans who traveled to Iraq from 2003 to 2006 (estimated to be 70 from the United Kingdom and 20 from France), none of them committed acts on their home soil.<sup>20</sup>

The trend of foreign fighters rejecting home and instead continuing their pursuit of jihad is most vibrantly displayed in the wake of the Soviet-Afghan War (1979-1989).

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<sup>15</sup> Byman and Shapiro, *Be Afraid*, 7.

<sup>16</sup> Hegghammer “Should I Stay,” 11.

<sup>17</sup> Byman and Shapiro, *Be Afraid*, 7.

<sup>18</sup> Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11* (New York: Random House, 2005), 163-64.

<sup>19</sup> Hegghammer “Should I Stay,” 10.

<sup>20</sup> Byman and Shapiro, *Be Afraid*, 16.

Many of the *mujahideen*, “holy warriors,” who fought the Red Army did not return home after the last tank withdrew from Kandahar; instead, they went to Bosnia, the Caucasus and Somalia.<sup>21</sup>

### **Why is it alarming that Chechens are in Syria?**

The concern for Chechen foreign fighters in Syria comes in three areas. The first is reflected in the discussion above, that foreign fighters, regardless of where they are from, are known to change the dynamic on the ground. As they are motivated to fight by different forces than local insurgencies, this motivation tends to be reflected in rather ostentatious displays of violence. According to David Malet’s study of foreign fighters in conflicts spanning from 1815-2015, foreign fighters have a tendency to make the battles they are involved in more violent and longer than they otherwise might have been.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, this is demonstrated in those that are remaining in the Islamic State’s last holdouts in the deserts of Syria. These individuals have stated that they have no intention to return home; that they came to Syria to die as *shaheed* (martyrs) and they intend to see that through.<sup>23</sup>

The second area is rooted in the same question that many countries need to be asking themselves now that the Islamic State continues to lose physical territory, and recruits are scattering. What to do with returning IS members? As of March 2018, the policy that Ramzan Kadyrov, the President of the Chechen Republic, has pursued in response to the foreign fighters has been one of surprising compassion—women and

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<sup>21</sup> Berger, *Jihad Joe*, viii; 51-78.

<sup>22</sup> David Malet, The Foreign Fighter Project (2014), <http://www.foreignfighter.com>. Accessed April 26, 2018.

<sup>23</sup> Jeanine De Roy Van Zuijdewijn “Foreign Fighters: New Directions and Challenges” (conference, George Washington University, Elliott School of International Affairs, Washington, DC, March 07, 2018).

children affiliated with the movement are welcomed back into the Republic without punishment, and there are active attempts to bring the estimated 700 women and children back.<sup>24</sup> Although this appears to be a better approach than neighboring Dagestan's aggressive response to returning IS affiliates, it still raises the question of what will happen to these individuals who have, quite literally, gone through war as time goes on.<sup>25</sup> While Kadyrov has not penalized returnees from Syria and Iraq, he is still more than happy to proclaim strong action against the local jihadists. Should a foreign fighter return and connect with the Emirate, then, what havoc could they wreck?

The number of foreign fighters in Syria are indicators of a much deeper phenomenon. There is already an existing jihadist organization within, not just Chechnya, but across the Northern Caucasus—the Caucasus Emirate, described above. This leads to the third area of concern. That such a number of Chechens have hedged their bets in Syria and Iraq says more about the state of the CE and the lingering jihadist sentiment within Chechnya than it does about the success of Islamic State social media publications.

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<sup>24</sup> Anna Arutunyan, *ISIS Returnees Bring Both Hope and Fear to Chechnya* (Russia: International Crisis Group, 2018), <https://bit.ly/2GdqqAU>.

<sup>25</sup> Denis Sokolov and Sufian Zhemukhov, “Russia's North Caucasus: Inner Decolonization, Nationalism, and Islam” (lecture, George Washington University, Elliot School of International Affairs, Washington, DC, March 30, 2018).

## CHAPTER TWO: WHY DO CHECHENS FIGHT IN THE *JIHAD*?



Figure 3 Map of the North Caucasus

### “Jihadism”

It is common to find the terms *Salafism*, *Wahhabism*, *Salafi-jihadism* and even *jihadism* used interchangeably by the mass media, the government and the academy. This mixing of terms is incredibly frustrating, as it flattens ambiguities. For the duration of this thesis, the ideology espoused by the Islamic State and its affiliates, al-Qaeda and its

affiliates, and the Caucasus Emirates will be referred to as *jihadism*. An individual who holds and pursues such an ideology will then be referred to as a *jihadist* or a *jihadi*.

The theological differences between Wahhabism and Salafism are too minute and irrelevant to the overall discussion to warrant explanation here. However, where they stand in clear contrast is in their politics. Wahhabism, whose tenets were constructed by Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab in the eighteenth century, is the official state religion of Saudi Arabia. Though fundamental, they do not wish to overhaul state systems.<sup>26</sup> To call jihadists Wahhabists is not only wrong, but such language conflates an inherently *non-state* and *revolutionary* movement to the nation state of Saudi Arabia. It also draws geopolitical repercussions, as it attaches culpability to Riyadh.

Salafism, on the other hand, separates itself from other Sunni sects on six guiding principles, according to Peter Mandaville.<sup>27</sup> The first is the explicit emphasis on monotheism, though its meaning extends beyond the simple belief in a single god, and instead encompasses “even the appearance of worshipping anything other than God.”<sup>28</sup> This is why there are no depictions of people—especially the Prophet Mohammed—in Islamic art, as such depictions could be easily interpreted as worshipping the individual. In the same regard, Salafis see no reason to distinguish themselves between jurisprudential pluralities or sectarianism. As with God, there is only one worshiping community, and those that are to sow discord are acting in sin—this Mandaville’s the

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<sup>26</sup> Robert Schaefer, *The Insurgency in Chechnya and the North Caucasus: From Gazavat to Jihad* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2011), 150.

<sup>27</sup> Peter Mandaville, “Radical Islamism and Jihad Beyond the Nation-State,” in *Global Political Islam* (New York & London: Routledge, 2012), 262.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.



second point. Points three, four, five and six are also equally interconnected. Salafis maintain a strict interpretation of the Quran; they reject the notion of following legal precedent blindly; they reject innovations to the interpretation of law and Book; they do not accept approaching the faith with any thread of rationality. Shiraz Maher offers a more succinct explanation: Salafism is “a redemptive philosophy based around an idealized version of Islam that enshrines both *authenticity* and *purity* [emphasis added].”<sup>29</sup>

Interestingly, there is little space in either Mandeville’s detailed explanation, Maher’s summation, or in other texts regarding the faith, for the allowance of *violence*. That is because Salafism is only one piece of jihadism’s philosophical provenance. Jihadism sits at the intersection of two social movements, *Salafism* and *Islamism*. Islamism can best be described as a political movement in the wake of the Second World War, in which the religion of Islam is to be closely and deeply intertwined with the political structures of the state.<sup>30</sup> It was seen as a viable alternative to the ideologies of Eastern communism and Western capitalism-democracy.<sup>31</sup> The works of Mawla Abul A’la Mawdudi of Pakistan, Sayyid Qutb of Egypt, Muhammad abd-al-Salam Faraj, also of Egypt stitched these ideas of violence for the sake of political goals, and in many cases drew inspiration from Salafist theology.<sup>32</sup> The Iranian Revolution of 1979 revitalized the

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<sup>29</sup> Shiraz Maher, *Salafi-Jihadism: The History of an Idea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 7

<sup>30</sup> Michael Farquhar, “Islamist Movements: Analytical Frameworks” (lecture, King’s College London, London, UK, January 24, 2017).

<sup>31</sup> Shireen Hunter, *Islam in Russia: The Politics of Identity and Security* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2015), 36.

<sup>32</sup> Quintan Wiktorowicz, “A Genealogy of Radical Islam,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 28, no. 2 (February 2005): 83.

discourse of an Islamic “third way” by demonstrating the successful possibility of violently overthrowing a perceived corrupt government and establishing a theocracy based on strict Islamic guides. Jihadism takes its modern form with Abdullah Azzam’s *Join the Caravan* (1987) under the barrage of Soviet bombardment during the Soviet-Afghan War (1979-1989).<sup>33</sup>

In *Join the Caravan*, Azzam implored all Muslims to come to Afghanistan in an act of defensive jihad against the Soviets. He argued that defensive jihad was no longer a collective obligation, but an individual one on the same level as the other five pillars of Islam.<sup>34</sup> The five pillars of Islam are the statement that there is only one god, Allah, and Mohammed is his messenger (*shahada*); praying five times per day while facing Mecca (*salah*); charity to the poor (*zakat*); fasting during the holy month of Ramadan (*sawm*); and making a pilgrimage to Mecca (*hajj*).

There were countless stories laced with romance and shared of the holy warriors (*mujahideen*) narrowly missing death, being impervious to peril, and of slain fighters smelling sweet and not decomposing.<sup>35</sup> The withdrawal of Soviet troops further legitimized and made mystical the experiences of the *mujahideen*, by demolishing the Soviet Union’s image as indestructible and propping the utilization of Islam as a tool of resistance and liberation.<sup>36</sup>

The notion of *jihad* as an inherently defensive and global, as well as an individual obligation for all Muslims, is one factor which separates jihadism from Salafism. Another

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<sup>33</sup> Wright, *The Looming*, 111.

<sup>34</sup> Wiktorowicz, “Genealogy,” 84.

<sup>35</sup> Wright, *Tower*, 114-138.

<sup>36</sup> Hunter, *Islam in Russia*, 37.

is the conflation of civilian populations as legitimate targets, as having “assisted the enemy in ‘deed, word or mind.’”<sup>37</sup> Third is the ability to declare someone, especially a political figure, an apostate, or *takfir*, thereby marking them a legitimate enemy too.<sup>38</sup> IS adherents would later include minority sects (e.g., the Shi’a or Yazidi) into this definition.<sup>39</sup>

While jihadism does extend from the same philosophical milieu as Salafists, thus warranting the oft used *Salafi-jihadism*, the point of violence makes this term feel inaccurate. Peaceful Salafists exist. Peaceful jihadis—fundamentally—cannot.

Some often hold judgment for using the term *jihad* in this context as it is a sacred term for moderate Muslims. It refers to the internal struggle that every Muslim must grapple with in adhering to the religious tenets of the faith and the life that Allah has put forth for them.<sup>40</sup> Even the lesser jihad, known as the just-war theory of Islam, only allows violence in the context of defense.<sup>41</sup> Conflating this mainstream definition of the word with the destructive works of groups like al-Qaeda and the Caucasus Emirate is equally poor definition building. This is noted and the depths of its problematic nature appreciated. However, it is the performance of violence that distinguishes these individuals and their ideology from other forms of Islam; they are connected directly to

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<sup>37</sup> Wiktorowicz, “Genealogy,” 89.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Cole Bunzel, *From Paper State to Caliphate: The Ideology of the Islamic State Iraq* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institute, 2014): 10.

<sup>40</sup> Mohammed Abu-Nimer, *Nonviolence and Peace Building in Islam: Theory and Practice* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003): 45.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

violence. As they envelope their violence under the banner of *jihad*, it is clear to use this as the core of its term.

Jihadism, thusly, is an ideology based in Salafist theology with the political aims of creating an independent state and society fully integrated with conservative Islamic law. It identifies its enemies in two broad strokes fold—the “Near” (local heads of state) and the “Far” (the United States and its Western allies), and includes civilian populations thought to be “supporting” them, and in some cases, minority denominations. Violence is the main vehicle by which they deliver their message, seeking the maximization of civilian lives and physical damage to be done.

It is wrong to claim that any strand of conservative Islamic belief prompts one to violence. Indeed, there seems to be a limited correlation between *belief* and *behavior* when referring to the processes of radicalization.<sup>42</sup> However, there was a unique combination of events and circumstances that made the ideology of jihadism potent to Chechen audience. First, the introduction of Salafism coupled with the rejection of local faiths (Sufi or otherwise Soviet-touched). Second, the mounting of Islamic rhetoric and framing during the First Chechen War (1994-6), repositioned Islam within the public discourse as a force for political and cultural resistance.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Borum, *Review of Theories*, 8.

<sup>43</sup> Valery Tishkov, *Chechnya: A War Torn Society* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004): 203.

## Islam in Chechnya

### **Sufism: Uniquely Indigenous**

“Not all Chechens pray...and not all Chechens fast” Katherine Layton writes, “nevertheless, one would be hard pressed to find a Chechen claim to be any religion other than Islam.”<sup>44</sup> Islam came to Chechnya from the east, by way of Dagestan, once considered a great place of scholarship within the Muslim world.<sup>45</sup> Early records indicate that efforts to proselytize among the *abreks* (bandits) and *teips* (clans) in what would become Chechnya began between the seventh and eighth centuries.<sup>46</sup> It took until the 1500s for their religion to take root in the lowlands, but it was not until the 1800s that it reached the highlands; this allowed for a higher blend of traditional pagan beliefs and practices.<sup>47</sup> The form of Islam that these Dagestani missionaries brought with them was Sufism.

It is difficult to describe Sufism, in both its practice and theology. Its *manhaj*—the methods, theology and practice by which practitioners reach truth—are deeply rooted in the esoteric and the incorporeal.<sup>48</sup> The main path through which Sufis reach Allah is through passion, “transcendent rituals.”<sup>49</sup> In addition to praying, Sufis sing and they dance. The *zikr* is their most identifiable practice: the ecstatic dance is sometimes

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<sup>44</sup> Katherine S. Layton, *Chechens: Culture and Society* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014): 51.

<sup>45</sup> Brian Glyn Williams, *Inferno in Chechnya: The Russian-Chechen Wars, the al-Qaeda Myth, and the Boston Marathon Bombers* (Lebanon: ForeEdge), 5-6.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Hank Johnston, “Ritual, strategy, and deep culture in the Chechen national movement,” *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 1 no. 3 (2008): 327.

<sup>48</sup> Abu-Nimer, *Nonviolence*, 44.

<sup>49</sup> Schaefer, *Gazavat*, 145.

referred to as “whirling dervishes.”<sup>50</sup> The arcane tendencies and effusive roots of Sufism has led scholars to make comparisons between it and the Jewish kabbalah or Christian Gnosticism.<sup>51</sup> The theological and practical emphasis on the hereafter as opposed to the herenow has given Sufism a reputation for being socially withdrawn and disinterested with the day-to-day goings on in the world. It is believed that by persistent inner renewal, that it would prompt others to do the same until the world has reached a level of peace.<sup>52</sup>

While the complete conversion of the area now known as Chechnya took three hundred years, Sufism slipped into the local social structure so completely and amiably that it is often difficult to note where the faith ends and where the secular begins. The faith became another layer by which individual Chechens could understand themselves within their highly regulated society: *shari’a* and Allah further legitimized and supported *adat*, and *adat* became the means by which Islam supported itself.<sup>53</sup> *Teip* members would elect their elders as their sheiks, thus creating a fraternity, *tariqat* (although not every clan was its own fraternity).<sup>54</sup> Old pagan rituals were seamlessly integrated into the faith’s practice.<sup>55</sup> While there were multiple attempts to bring Chechen society into the fold of more orthodox forms of Sufism—indeed, this was one of Imam Shamil’s

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Mustansir Mir, “Kabbalah and Sufism: A Comparative Look at Jewish and Islamic Mysticism” in *Jewish-Muslim Encounters: History, Philosophy, and Culture* ed. Charles Selengut (St. Paul: Paragon, 2001), 165; Ann Williams Duncan, “Religion and Secrecy” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74, no. 2 (June 2006): 470. It should be noted that the later document does not make direct comparisons between Sufism and Christian Gnosticism; however, they are presented as examples of “hidden knowledge” in certain faiths.

<sup>52</sup> Abu-Nimer, *Nonviolence*, 45.

<sup>53</sup> Layton *Chechens* (79); Johnston, “Ritual, strategy, and deep culture,” 335.

<sup>54</sup> Emil Souleimanov, “Jihad or Security? Understanding the Jihadization of Chechen Insurgency through Recruitment into Jihadist Units” *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 17, no. 1 (2015): 92.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

objectives when constructing the original Caucasus Emirate—those attempts were not adhered to.<sup>56</sup> “The Sufi form of Islam could not be better suited to the freedom-loving Chechens,” writes Sadulaev, as they “have always opposed power of any kind save the authority of wisdom, experience and personal moral example.”<sup>57</sup>

One place where the blurring of faith and society is rather obvious is in the space of politics. It might seem contradictory to speak about “politics” with a society so fractured and disparate as the Chechen *teips*; however, the absence of a single leader or even a ruling class does not negate the need to converse and compete among each other for goods and influence. Vatchagaev describes the fraternities as “excessively politicized” and likens them to political parties.<sup>58</sup> That the original understanding and experience of Sufism as something intimately tied up with politics—prior even to the Soviet invasion—is something to bear in mind as “the short century” comes to a close.

### **Sovietization**

Despite attempts to depoliticize and de-intellectualize the faith, Moscow was only partially successful in eradicating the opiate of the Chechen masses.<sup>59</sup> It survived underground and around dim kitchen tables, as so many other banned or otherwise heavily restricted cultures did under Soviet law.<sup>60</sup> Hank Johnson also points to Sufism’s “secretive, clandestine, militantly anti-Russian” nature as additional reasons for its survival.<sup>61</sup> The secretive and clandestine aspects lie in the flat structure; the militant anti-

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<sup>56</sup> Johnston “Ritual, strategy, and deep culture,” 328.

<sup>57</sup> German Sadulaev, *I am a Chechen!* (London: Vintage, 2010), 45.

<sup>58</sup> Mairbek Vatchagaev, “The Politicization of Sufism in Chechnya,” *The Caucasus Survey* 1 no. 2 (2014), 28.

<sup>59</sup> Galina Yemelianova, “Islam, Nation and State,” *The Caucasus Survey* 1 no. 2 (2014), 6.

<sup>60</sup> Layton, *Chechens*, 51.

<sup>61</sup> Johnston “Ritual, strategy, and deep culture,” 328.

Russian facet has been discussed at length above. This is not to suggest that Islam in Chechnya had a bustling underground life. Indeed, it only *survived* Soviet rule; it did not flourish. Most religious education was self-taught and passed down through families outside formal institutions; few read or were familiar with Islamic law.<sup>62</sup>

A shift occurred under the tenures of both Secretary Generals Khrushchev and Brezhnev, so dramatic that in the 1960s, a Soviet researcher estimated that half of all Muslim believers in the Chechen-Ingush ASSR were members of Sufi fraternities.<sup>63</sup> During this time, Moscow sought to expand their influence into the Middle East, especially towards Egypt, as President Gamal Nasser's Arab nationalism was deeply anti-Western.<sup>64</sup> It was imperative, then, for the Soviet government to present themselves to Nasser—and the wider Middle East region—as if not accepting, then at least *tolerant* of Islam. Thus began the development of “official Islam” within the Soviet Union, and the establishment of the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults (*Совет по делам религий*).<sup>65</sup>

These religious boards did not chair or speak to Sufi clerics; it was designed to address the dominant, mainstream Islamic sect, Sunnism, with more liberal leanings in their jurisprudence. To what extent this initiative was successful in controlling the message of Islam in these communities is certainly up to debate. Sadulaev says, “The Chechens have never been fundamentalists, they have never favoured [sic] orthodox Islam. There were always mosques and mullahs, but not many went to the mosques, and

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<sup>62</sup> Layton, *Chechens*, 79.

<sup>63</sup> Hunter, *Islam in Russia*, 32; Johnston, “Ritual, strategy, and deep culture,” 328.

<sup>64</sup> Hunter, *Islam in Russia*, 32.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.



the mullahs were always the butt of jokes.”<sup>66</sup> According to Galina Yemelianova, the Council had little power; their duties and purview were related only to the appointment of local imams and ensuring Islamic education and publication did not contradict official Soviet doctrine.<sup>67</sup>

Even with strictures from Moscow in place, Islamic membership within fraternities was determined less by any real understanding or internalization of the faith, but by bloodline and *teip*. Lieven, in discussing the matter with a local, unnamed Chechen, describes that “becoming a member is one of the passages to adulthood, and to a recognized role as an adult male within the family.”<sup>68</sup> The same can be said for its leadership. That leadership was determined by affiliation rather than ability would become a point of contention in the 1990s as these systems began to lose their resonance.

Under Brezhnev, controls over the faith were so loosened that Moscow encouraged official clergy from the Spiritual Board of Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan to travel, albeit under tight conditions and monitoring, throughout the Islamic world.<sup>69</sup> And indeed, Shireen Hunter discusses that this loosening of restrictions empowered unofficial Sufi fraternities to be more open in their activities in social and political affairs.<sup>70</sup> By this time, the state of Chechen religion seems to exist on a rather ironic plane, where the faith was equally hyper-politicized and sanitized of any political motivations at all.

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<sup>66</sup> Sadulaev, *I am a Chechen!*, 45.

<sup>67</sup> Hunter, *Islam in Russia*, 33.

<sup>68</sup> Lieven, *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 368.

<sup>69</sup> Hunter, *Islam in Russia*, 33.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid*, 36.

The dual forces of local *teips* and their incompetence with Soviet imposition and sanitization, might have been a force driving young Chechens to different forms of their faith. There was a desire for something from the seeming source of Islam, untainted by local traditions or the Soviet apparatus.

### **The Encroachment of Salafism**

When Mikhail Gorbachev became Secretary General in 1985, he enacted a system of reforms known as *perestroika* and *glasnost*. These policies were meant not only to make the bureaucratic and economic systems of the Soviet Union more efficient, but to liberalize society at large. A more open society ushered an allowance of public displays of ethno-nationalism, which inevitably led to more vociferous calls for independence. A more open society also led to the re-emergence of public displays of religion. The trend was solidified into law in October 1990, with the Politburo's adoption of the Decree on Freedom of Religious Persuasions.<sup>71</sup>

An Islamic revival swept across the Central Asian and Caucasian republics. The Russian translation of the Quran became a national bestseller.<sup>72</sup> Islamic holidays were celebrated in the open, as were religious rites, such as circumcision, weddings, and funerals.<sup>73</sup> Madrassas, Islamic schools, and mosques were constructed.<sup>74</sup> Religious duties

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<sup>71</sup> Galina Yemelianova, "Divergent trends of Islamic radicalization in Muslim Russia" in *Russia and Islam: State, Society and Radicalism* ed. Luke March (London & New York: Routledge 2010), 129.

<sup>72</sup> Tishkov, *War Torn*, 168.

<sup>73</sup> Yemelianova, "Divergent Trends," 129.

<sup>74</sup> Domitilla Sagramoso, "The Radicalisation of Islamic Salafi Jama'ats in the North Caucasus: Moving Closer to the Global Jihadist Movement?," *Europe-Asia Studies* 64, no. 3 (2012): 567.

were performed without legal retaliation: prayer, fasting, and perhaps most strikingly, pilgrimages to the holy sites of Mecca and the Kaaba (*hajj*) became common place.<sup>75</sup>

The lifting of these restrictions allowed Chechens to express all aspects of their identity: their sense of nationality and their religion, and thus entrenching one into the other. Islam was already an important pillar of Chechen self-identification, as expressed above, but now they were mutually reinforcing.<sup>76</sup> “It is well known that religious revivals are tightly tied to nationalistic trends,” observed S. Muslimov, an anti-religious Dagestani in 1983.<sup>77</sup>

The blend of the religious and the political is demonstrated in the rise of Islamic political parties. Of note, the Islamic Renaissance Party, established in Astrakhan in June 1990; the Islamic Democratic Party, established in Dagestan and led by Abdurashid Saidov; and the Party of the Islamic Way, established in 1990 and led by Bislan Gantamirov in Chechnya.<sup>78</sup> The Islamic Renaissance Party had a small contingent in Chechnya, which criticized elements of Sufi practice, though they never reached the influence of their more sophisticated counterparts in Dagestan.<sup>79</sup> The Party of the Islamic Way would be the connecting piece between Chechnya and al-Qaeda during the Inter-

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<sup>75</sup> Hunter, *Islam in Russia*, 39

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid, 35.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, 40; Siverstev, “Civil Society and Religion in Traditional Political Culture: The Case of Russia” in *The Politics of Religion in Russia and the New States of Eurasia*, ed. Michael Bourdeaux (London & New York: Routledge, 2015), 87.

<sup>79</sup> Domitilla Sagramoso and Akhmet Yarlykapov, “Caucasian Crescent: Russia's Islamic Policies and its Responses to Radicalization” in *The Fire Below: How the Caucasus Shaped Russia* (New York & London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 56.

War Years, reaching out to Osama bin Laden for supplies, soldiers and financial support.<sup>80</sup>

In this environment of opening, Chechnya reached for the Islamic world, wanting to learn about their faith outside Soviet purview and old personal traditions. The rest of the Islamic world reached back with money, projects and material.<sup>81</sup> They funded the construction of madrassas and mosques; aided individuals who wanted to take the *hajj*. Scholarships for young and new scholars to study and train in Saudi Arabia were procured. Smaller, everyday school supplies and textbooks were also sent. The sovereign of Saudi Arabia, King Fahd, sent one million copies of the Holy Quran to Central Asia alone.<sup>82</sup> These projects were happily supported by international foundations such as Islamic Relief, the International Islamic Salvation Organization, *Taiba*, *al-Haramain* and the Islamic Benevolence Foundation.<sup>83</sup> Other missionaries and donations came from Turkey and Pakistan, though on the rare occasion, they came from Iran and Azerbaijan.<sup>84</sup>

While it would be difficult—if not insulting—to attempt to determine the level of sincerity of these charity moves, it can be confidently stated that these programs were fueled, in part, by political agendas. By the late 1980s and early 1990s, the movement of political Islam (see, “Jihadism”) had been brewing in the home states of these missionaries for decades. Their Islam, thus, was inherently politically charged. They also professed a conservative and literalist Islam, and dismissed local Chechen practices and

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<sup>80</sup> Schaefer, *Gazavat*, 173.

<sup>81</sup> Hunter, *Islam in Russia*, 39.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Sagramoso, “Jama’ats,” 567.

<sup>84</sup> Hunter, *Islam in Russia*, 39.

beliefs. Indeed, the tenets of Sufism are considered heretical to Salafis and Wahhabis.<sup>85</sup>

Upon exposure to a new practice of Islam, many locals “lost interest in Sufi brotherhoods, while some of them started leaning to Wahhabists.”<sup>86</sup>

One could sympathize with the Chechen population for their eagerness to embrace messages purporting to be true Islam. Their practice had been pushed deeply underground by Soviet rule, and their institutions broken by the Deportation (1944-1953). On February 23, 1994, on command from the Soviet Secretary General, Joseph Stalin, nearly 400,000 individuals were forced from their homes to the Tajik Soviet Republic, the Kazakh Soviet Republic or the Yakut Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. It has been estimated that as much as one third of Chechnya’s entire population was killed in the process and state of deportation.<sup>87</sup> This event is explored further in Appendix A.

Locals found Salafism appealing not only because it pointed out the errors in their practice. After all, it is easier to draw flies with honey than it is with vinegar. Salafism, with its strict interpretation of the world through the Quran, offered simple answers to a complex world. This was especially comforting after the fall of the Soviet Union.<sup>88</sup>

Additionally, Salafism rejects discord, be it through sectarian or national divide. It thus offered the Chechens, who had been isolated for decades—one could possibly argue centuries—entrance to a greater, united Islamic community. A pamphlet from this time, supplied by the World Assembly of Muslim Youth, was entitled “Let’s get to know

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<sup>85</sup> Schaefer, *Gazavat*, 145.

<sup>86</sup> Souleimanov, “Jihad or Security?” 95.

<sup>87</sup> Williams, *Inferno*, 67.

<sup>88</sup> Sagramoso, “Jama’ats,” 567.

Islam” and it described itself as “a gift from your *brother* believers [emphasis added].”<sup>89</sup>

This community transcended the ethnic skirmishes and local divides that so defined the Caucasus, and allowed them entrance into a world beyond their borders.<sup>90</sup>

This renewal of faith was felt with particular vigor among the youth. Those young Chechens that travelled into the traditional Islamic world, those that consumed this new literature, then became prominent in their own communities. These “young imams” were not only fluent in Arabic, the language of the Quran, but in the details of their theology. It was a skill that their predecessors could only imagine. The “old clergy,” cut wholly from the cloth of the Soviet system of spiritual boards or individual Sufis trained at home, could not keep with the changing tides. They were seen as corrupted sources and untrustworthy as they were a part of the Soviet system and close with the authorities.<sup>91</sup> These individuals were also perceived to have to have gained their titles, not by merit, but by simply have being born in the right *teip* that granted them access to become a sheikh.<sup>92</sup>

On the eve of the collapse of the Soviet Union, a series of trends collided in Chechnya. The revival of Islam in the Caucasus spurred the further entrenchment of Islam as an expression of their national identity. The introduction of conservative and traditional missionaries from nations enveloped in politically-charged public discourse were met positively by a population starved of information that had not been sullied by the Soviets or muddled by incompetence. This leads to the rejection of Chechen

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<sup>89</sup> Sebastian Smith, *Allah's Mountains: The Battle for Chechnya* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 75.

<sup>90</sup> Sagramoso, “Jama’ats,” 567.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid, 563.

<sup>92</sup> Souleimanov, “Jihad or Security,” 95.

“traditional” Islam, the embrace of Salafism, and makes the fertile the process for radicalization in the fallout of the First Chechen War (1994-1996).

### **A Small, Victorious...Religious War?**

The First Chechen War began in late December 1994 and ran until August 30, 1996, just a little over a year. But it was an intense, devastating year: the bombardment of Grozny left observers with recollections of Dresden, and videos circulated of Chechens beheading Russian soldiers.<sup>93</sup> On August 31, Lieutenant General Alexander Lebed and Aslan Maskhadov, second in command, signed the Khasavyurt Accord. The Accords brought an end to the immediate violence, but they tabled the question of independence for five years; the conversation would pick up where it had been left in 2001.<sup>94</sup>

It is difficult to categorize the war which ravaged Chechnya in the mid-1990s as a war for independence or a war triggered by existential panic by a crumbling Russian state. Daniel Triesman argues that Moscow viewed the Chechen desire for independence with sympathy.<sup>95</sup> Remembering also that the last Soviet republic to declare independence was Turkmenistan in October 1991. Furthermore, independence was declared in 1991; it was President Dudaev’s first decree in his elected role.<sup>96</sup> By the outbreak of war in 1994, the momentum of ethnic nationalism had certainly died. In any case, if stopping the wave of independence was such a concern for the Kremlin, why the three-year delay? It seems instead, that Russia’s motivations to invade in 1994 were fueled less by memories of the

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<sup>93</sup> Schaefer, *Gazavat*, 129.

<sup>94</sup> Andrew Meier, *Chechnya: To the Heart of a Conflict* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005), 5.

<sup>95</sup> Daniel Treisman, *The Return: Russia’s Journey from Gorbachev to Medvedev* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011), 269.

<sup>96</sup> Carlotta Gall and Thomas de Waal, *Chechnya: Calamity in the Caucasus* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 99.

Baltics and more of Afghanistan. They needed to stabilize the situation. Appendix B contains a more detailed explanation of the elements that escalated into war.

The First Chechen War was also certainly not jihad, despite the efforts Russian intelligent took to paint it as such.<sup>97</sup> It can be better understood as *gazavat*, the Chechen word for God-sanctioned defensive battle.<sup>98</sup> As the battle waged, President Dzhokhar Dudayev invoked Islamic terms and iconography, as soft a touch and as sideways a glance it was given. He swore his oath of office on a Quran.<sup>99</sup> The national flag had a “wide field of green (for Islam),” crossed by a band of white and red.<sup>100</sup> During his term, he even admitted, “Russia...has forced us to choose the path of Islam.”<sup>101</sup> Indeed, as the war continued, Islam, combined with potent nationalism, would prove to be the most effective form of mobilization for the locals against Russian aggressors.<sup>102</sup> An independence slogan read, “Chechnya is not a subject of Russia, it is a subject of Allah!”<sup>103</sup> In 1995, a Chechen war song held these lyrics: “Freedom or death/the cry was heard again in the mountains./Freedom or death/yes and Allah is on our side.”<sup>104</sup>

In the previous chapter, the muddling of religio-political identities was described. Through the First War’s invocation of religion, it also framed Islam as a successful tool of political and cultural resistance.<sup>105</sup> This is an important development, because it further

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<sup>97</sup> Lieven, *Tombstone*, 357.

<sup>98</sup> Johnston, “Ritual, strategy, and deep culture,” 327-329.

<sup>99</sup> Schaefer, *Gazavat*, 126.

<sup>100</sup> Gall and de Waal, *Calamity*, 103.

<sup>101</sup> Emil Souleimanov, “Chechnya, Wahhabism and the Invasion of Dagestan,” *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 9 no. 4 (December 2005), quoted in Emma Gilligan, *Terror in Chechnya: Russia and the Tragedy of Civilians in War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 29.

<sup>102</sup> Schaefer, *Gazavat*, 125.

<sup>103</sup> Smith, *Mountains*, 125.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

<sup>105</sup> Tishkov, *War Torn*, 203.



legitimizes the utility of Islam as a means of understanding and discussing the situation, as well as framing the proper responses. It lends the increasingly radicalized factions credence.

### **The Mountain of a Movement**

All that had made Salafism appealing and all that made Sufism repulsive during the peel of the Soviet Union had intensified among the rubble and ruin of the First War. Local leaders and Sufi communities were already discredited and isolated for promoting a false Islam. They were further disgraced after the war through their affiliations. The breakdown of society after the War had led to constant squabbles within the leadership, and individually, they aligned themselves with the warlords looking for spoils of the tumult. A 40-year-old architect from Grozny testifies, “The interesting thing is, you might expect the clergy’s corruption to make the people turn away from religion, but instead they were still reaching for Islam, all over the country.”<sup>106</sup>

Ideology was only one spark in the radicalization of the Chechens, which transformed *gazavat* into *jihad*. The other was material need. The economic devastation from the First War cannot go understated. Lieven, who was a correspondent for *The Financial Times* and in Chechnya during the war, noted that his colleagues, who had been in the hotbeds of Beirut and Sarajevo, said the ongoing bombardment of the city “dwarfed those battles.”<sup>107</sup> Salafists took advantage of the situation by offering able-bodied men relatively large sums of money to join their movement.<sup>108</sup> Additionally, due

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<sup>106</sup> Tishkov, *War Torn*, 171.

<sup>107</sup> Lieven, *Tombstone*, 43.

<sup>108</sup> Gilligan, *Terror*, 29.

to the sheer magnitude of violence and specific policies carried out by the Russian government, many of those whom might have been moderating voices were killed.<sup>109</sup>

It is important to bear in mind that the growing power and influence of the Salafists did not all entirely lie in ideological or material need. Desperate times, as they say, call for desperate measures. For many Chechens, such as “Khava,” interviewed by Valery Tishkov says, the Salafists “have some good qualities—unity, respect for each other, also money. People have started saying already, let even them come, *maybe life will get back to normal and children will go to school* [emphasis added].”<sup>110</sup>

If the First War can be understood as a great fire, by 1996, it had consumed all of the room’s oxygen and evaporated into vapor—simmering and invisible, but still potent. These forces alongside the catalyst of Afghanistan-trained foreign fighters, acted as a sudden rush of new air. The conflict rekindled in 1999 as a cataclysmic backdraft.

### **Compromise**

What little remained of infrastructure and stability was reflected in the political ability of the leaders. That is to say, there was none. In 1996, President Dudayev was killed in an airstrike, to be succeeded by his Vice President, Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev.<sup>111</sup> Yandarbiyev took Dudayev’s assurances of *not* seeking an Islamic state, and did away with them. He declared Soviet and Russian law to be invalid, replaced secular courts with *shari’a* ones, and hastily stuffed key government and military positions with Salafists.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Domitilla Sagramoso, “Violence and Conflict in the North Caucasus” (Lecture, King’s College London, London, UK, January 27, 2017).

<sup>110</sup> Tishkov, *War Torn*, 177.

<sup>111</sup> Williams, *Inferno*, 112.

<sup>112</sup> Schaefer, *Gazavat*, 172.

However, a call for elections quickly ended this reign and brought Aslan Maskhadov to the fore.

President Maskhadov was elected freely and fairly, as determined by observers from the Organization for the Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).<sup>113</sup> His election was the easiest part of his presidency. Trapped between an ever-radicalizing wing of his government co-opting the motifs of jihadism, a restless and broken population extorted by inter-*teip* rivalries and a government in Moscow that refused to uphold their end of the Khasavyurt Accord, as well as a mute international community laid the stage for devastating odds. His only true ally was chief mufti Akhmed Kadyrov.<sup>114</sup> In 1999, Maskhadov lamented that Chechnya was on “the brink of civil and inter-*teip* war.”<sup>115</sup> To stem this trend, he gave into the demands of the Salafists, declaring a return to *shari’a* and installing a *Shura* council.<sup>116</sup> He and Shamil Basayev (to be introduced below) declared themselves the head of their own council, and thus, the country; parallel governments were formed.<sup>117</sup>

Moscow had lost so much faith in Maskhadov being able to control the situation, that their policy toward him was to isolate him and encourage the collapse of the Chechen state.<sup>118</sup> Losing the ear of Moscow also lost Maskhadov the audience of the

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<sup>113</sup> Florina Fossato, “Russia: Maskhadov Claims Victory In Chechen Presidential Election,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, January 9, 1997, <https://bit.ly/2F5JEhX>.

<sup>114</sup> Smith, *Mountains*, 260; Schaefer, *Gazavat*, 176.

<sup>115</sup> Emma Gilligan, *Terror in Chechnya: Russia and the Tragedy of Civilians in War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 31.

<sup>116</sup> Schaefer, *Gazavat*, 175.

<sup>117</sup> James Hughes, *Chechnya: From Nationalism to Jihad* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 109.

<sup>118</sup> Williams, *Inferno*, 131.

international community and trust among his own people.<sup>119</sup> “There are criminals around me,” Maskhadov complained to his sister-in-law, “I can do nothing.”<sup>120</sup>

Particular attention must be given to the Khasavyurt Accord and Russia’s failures in terms of what they did not *do*, and what they did not *account for*. Khasavyurt mandated reparations to Chechnya, the removal of mines (which covered 15% of cultivable soil), the rebuilding of property damaged or destroyed, and the development of the destroyed economy—Russia did not do this.<sup>121</sup> Whether they simply *could not* or *would not* is a question for future investigation. Additionally, there was no provision for the removal of foreign fighters.

While they were not as strong in numbers as they were in the First War, they would grow in number and in influence. Networks that otherwise would not have been there became entrenched. Between 1997 and 1999, the number of foreign fighters in Chechnya rose considerably. Murad Batal al-Shishani reported that of these numbers, 59% originated from Saudi Arabia, 14% from Yemen, 10% from Egypt, 6% from Kuwaitis.<sup>122</sup> These volunteers not only brought their individual capabilities and passions, they brought money.

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<sup>119</sup> Hughes, *Nationalism*, 102; Williams, *Inferno*, 131.

<sup>120</sup> Treisman, *The Return*, 298.

<sup>121</sup> Schaefer, *Gazavat*, 178.

<sup>122</sup> Murad Batal al-Shishani, *The Rise and Fall of Arab Fighters in Chechnya* (Washington, DC: Jamestown Foundation.) <https://bit.ly/2Gj0pr7>.

## The Foreign Fighter Network

If the Second Chechen War can be understood as a terrible backdraft, the men responsible for opening the door and allowing the rush of oxygen back into the room, are Sheikh Ali Fathi al-Shishani, Omar ibn al-Khattab and Shamil Basayev.

Sheikh Ali Fathi al-Shishani came to Chechnya in 1993 among a swell of other Jordanian-Chechens, who were prompted to return to their newly liberated homeland. He stands out not only because he was well-versed in the nuances of Islam, but the fact that he could speak with the locals; he preached in Chechen.<sup>123</sup> And he knew just as much behind the *minbar* as he did behind the site of a Kalashnikov. He helped set up training camps and oversaw the recruitment of former fighters from Afghanistan to Chechnya.<sup>124</sup> The most important of those who heard his call, was by Omar ibn al-Khattab.

While Khattab's true origins may never be known—Russian security officials purport Jordan, others have said Saudi Arabia—he was nevertheless from war.<sup>125</sup> He fought in both Afghanistan and Tajikistan.<sup>126</sup> Like al-Shishani, Khattab did not make the trek alone. He was accompanied by about eighty foreign fighters, dubbing themselves the Islamic International Brigade, and financial support from Islamic charities, such as the al-Haramein Foundation.<sup>127</sup> It was purported that as many as 2,500 jihadists trained at his camp, the Caucasian Center of the Islamic Mission, located near the village of Shali.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Sagramoso, *Jama'ats*, 573.

<sup>124</sup> Paul Tumelty, "The Rise and Fall of Foreign Fighters in Chechnya," *Terrorism Monitor* 4 no. 2, <https://bit.ly/2pFsfHb>; Sagramoso, *Jama'ats*, 573.

<sup>125</sup> Smith, *Mountains*, 219; Williams, *Inferno*, 135; Gilligan, *Terror*, 29.

<sup>126</sup> Smith, *Mountains*, 218.

<sup>127</sup> Hughes, *Nationalism*, 102; Williams, *Inferno*, 120.

<sup>128</sup> Williams, *Inferno*, 123; Gilligan, *Terror*, 28.

Khattab's influence was such that even in 1998, it was noted that "he could prove the thin end of a wedge pushing the more tolerant Sufi Chechens into extremist, infidel-hating Islam."<sup>129</sup>

A foreigner, however, Khattab would not have been as successful of a leader had he not been able to forge some inway into Chechen society. It was his friendship with Shamil Basayev, perhaps more than his money or equipment, that served him within Chechnya. Khattab was appointed Basayev's deputy commander, and so close were these two, in fact, that Basayev had come to refer to Khattab as his brother.<sup>130</sup>

As "the most powerful leader in Chechnya," Basayev was crucial to the development and rooting of the discourse of jihadism.<sup>131</sup> He had experience—having fought with the Russians in Abkhazia (1992) and against them in Grozny—but most importantly, influence. Scholars and observers of the area have been quick to call him the "Che Guevara" of Chechnya.<sup>132</sup> Together with al-Khattab, the jihadist project seemed to be the only stabilizing force and guarantor of clear social order.<sup>133</sup> In April 1998, Basayev created the Congress of Peoples of Chechnya and Dagestan, with the stated objective of creating a caliphate between the two and to liberate the North Caucasus from Russian "infidels" with Basayev as its head *emir*.<sup>134</sup> It is possible to trace Basayev's centrality to

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<sup>129</sup> Smith, *Mountains*, 265.

<sup>130</sup> Brian Glyn Williams, "The 'Chechen Arabs': An Introduction to the Real al-Qaeda Terrorists from Chechnya," *Terrorism Monitor* 2 no. 1 <https://bit.ly/2GTwzLf>.

<sup>131</sup> Paul Murphy, *The Wolves of Islam: Russia and the Faces of Chechen Terror* (Dulles: Potomac Books Inc., 2006) in Williams, *Inferno*, 133.

<sup>132</sup> Williams, *Inferno*, 119; Schaefer, *Gazavat*, 164.

<sup>133</sup> Georgi Derluguian "Che Guevaras in Turbans: The Twisted Lineage of Islamic Fundamentalism in Chechnya and Dagestan." *The New Left Review*, no. 237 (1999), 3-27.

<sup>134</sup> Hughes, *Nationalism*, 105; Treisman, *The Return*, 299.

the jihadist movement in Chechnya by his death in 2006. The successor to his organization, what would be known as the Caucasus Emirate, was never able to reach to reach the levels of membership or effectiveness after Basayev's death.

Basayev and Khattab were formidable forces on their own, but it was their desire, and inevitable execution of this desire, to export their jihad across the border into Dagestan that tipped the region back into war. This incursion, alongside a series of apartment bombings resulting in the deaths of over 300 people, prompted Russian intervention.<sup>135</sup> These two weeks left the Russian people in "hysteria, as families went to bed wondering whether they would wake up."<sup>136</sup> These attacks were blamed on Basayev and his men, and Putin, then Prime Minister, famously declared, "Corner the bandits in the shithouse and wipe them out. There's nothing left to discuss."<sup>137</sup>

One of the significant effects of this war was the further entrenchment of jihadist radicalization. Though Moscow had devastated the Republic—Grozny resembled "the futuristic post-nuclear holocaust setting for a Mad Max movie rather a European city about to enter the twenty-first century"—Sagramoso and Yarlykapov state, "most members of Salafi *jama'ats* in the North Caucasus were pushed underground, and many moderate Salafis became increasingly radicalized."<sup>138</sup> Major combat operations officially ended in 2000, with a resounding Russian win, but only in the same sense that American "accomplished" their mission in Iraq in 2003.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Schaefer, *Gazavat*, 177.

<sup>136</sup> Treisman, *The Return*, 299.

<sup>137</sup> Gilligan, *Terror*, 32.

<sup>138</sup> Williams, *Inferno*, 158; Sagramoso and Yarlykaov, "Crescent," 65.

<sup>139</sup> BBC. "Russia 'Ends Chechnya Operation,'" April 19, 2009, <https://bbc.in/2EvUJbA>.

The counterinsurgency phase would continue for another nine years, marked by an escalation in violence and repressions and a deepening of radicalization among fighters.<sup>140</sup> From 2000, the entire conflict was understood in the terms and frameworks of the fighters and martyrs against “infidels and their Chechen ‘traitors to the faith.’”<sup>141</sup>

The Second Chechen War was long, bloody and gruesome. Large swathes of human rights violations were conducted on both sides. The scale of that violence should be taken into account, however. Basayev sought headline-grabbing acts against civilians—not just in Chechnya, but in Russia proper—like the Moscow metro bombings, Tushino concert bombings, Vnukovo airline bombings, the Dubrovka theater and Beslan school attacks. These were devastating attacks; the Dubrovka siege led to the deaths of 150 people and over 300 (mostly children) at Beslan.

However, with the might of an official and tax-backed military, the Russian military could extoll such damage three-fold. Of particular note of such tactics and acts was the use of fuel-air explosives (known by the Russians as “vacuum bombs”) and indiscriminate raids on villages known as *zachistkas* (cleansings). Vacuum bombs “can have the effect of a tactical nuclear weapon without the residual radiation.”<sup>142</sup>

### **The Emirate**

The tragedy of the Beslan School Siege, on September 1, 2004, has been noted as a watershed moment in the Chechen resistance, marked as a time when support for the Chechen cause turned cold. President Bush called President Putin to offer condolences

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<sup>140</sup> Sagramoso and Yarlykapov, “Crescent,” 67.

<sup>141</sup> Hughes, *Nationalism*, 106.

<sup>142</sup> Lester Grau and Timothy Smith, “Crushing Victory: Fuel-Air Explosives and Grozny 2000,” *Marine Corps Gazette*, August 2000 in Williams, *Inferno*, 159.



and reassurance, saying the two nations stood “shoulder to shoulder in the fight against international terrorism.”<sup>143</sup> British Prime Minister Tony Blair also sent his sentiments: “No one can justify such wicked acts of terrorism...My thoughts, and the thoughts of the British people are with you and the Russian people at this difficult time.”<sup>144</sup> The Siege, combined with the deaths of Khattab and Basayev (2002 and 2005, respectively), prompted a regrouping and the development of a new organization.

In November 2007, Doku Umarov, known as Russia’s bin Laden, declared himself the emir of the Caucasus Emirate; thus, centralizing and uniting what had been a loose confederation of fighters.<sup>145</sup> It is sometimes denoted as CE or IK for its Russian name, the Imirate Kavkaz (*Имарат Кавказ*). They maintain their primary goal is to remove the Russians and establish an Islamic State; they have no real animus towards the United States or other Western States.<sup>146</sup> Indeed, after the 2013 Boston Marathon Bombing, when journalists were quick to make connections to the Emirate, the Dagestani *vilayat*, insisted, “Caucasus *mujahideen* are not fighting against the United States. We are at war with Russia.”<sup>147</sup>

The Emirate does not engage in the level of spectacular attacks against civilians that Basayev did, and which kept Chechnya in headlines. Instead, they have tended to focus their attacks on military and police forces, with noted exceptions in 2010 (Moscow

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<sup>143</sup> Schaefer, *Gazavat*, 232.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> Cerwyn Moore and Mark Youngman, “Guide: The Caucasus Emirate,” *Radicalisation Research* (2017), <https://bit.ly/2HiRPu3>.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

metro bombing) and 2011 (Domodedovo airport bombing).<sup>148</sup> Umarov has extended his hand for assistance to international jihadist organizations, such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, but too little response.<sup>149</sup> At first, it was the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq which kept the attention of these organizations, but then when war broke out in Syria, the full brunt of these organizations went to it. The Emirate “is still in the same position that it was a few hundred years ago—waiting for assistance from its Islamic brethren.”<sup>150</sup> The Emirate has also gone as far as to say that local jihadists cannot fight in Syria simply because it is easier; Chechnya is still *fard al-ayn*, an individual religious obligation.<sup>151</sup>

However, the CE has never been able to reignite the Chechen battlefield. Continued counterterrorist efforts and the policies of Ramzan Kadyrov have significantly handicapped the CE. Moore and Youngman note that the deaths of key leaders have resulted in both a decline in the Emirate’s capabilities and capacities, as well as the “dilution of its unique ideological identity.”<sup>152</sup> Youngman observes this shift as an indication of its weakness and its inability to deliver desired results.<sup>153</sup> It has struggled to maintain its relevance and its membership. In 2011, Schaefer estimated their numbers to be 500 full-time rural fighters, and 600-800 in the city.<sup>154</sup> It would appear that these numbers, if they have not significantly dropped, have certainly never exceeded these

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<sup>148</sup> Schaefer, *Gazavat*, 248; Moore and Youngman, “Guide.”

<sup>149</sup> Schaefer, *Gazavat*, 249.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> Moore and Youngman, “Guide.”

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> Mark Youngman, “Broader, vaguer, weaker: The evolving ideology of the Caucasus Emirate leadership,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* (2016), 16.

<sup>154</sup> Schaefer, *Gazavat*, 243.

numbers. Umarov was killed in 2014, and an increase of security forces in the lead-up to the 2014 Sochi Olympics have further crippled their capabilities and relevancy.<sup>155</sup>

### **Ramzan Kadyrov: Chechnya's Hope and Villain**

When Ramzan Kadyrov became the president of the Chechen Republic in 2007, President Vladimir Putin challenged him with bringing stability to a region ravaged by two major wars and a ten-year insurgency. After close to a decade of power, the now 39-year-old seems to be reaping the benefits of his endeavors; in 2014, the country reached its lowest death count since before the second war started (Figure 3).<sup>156</sup> In order to take such steps, and as a reward for positive outcomes, Moscow has ceded Kadyrov an unprecedented amount of power. No other autonomous republic in Russia has control over their own security forces.<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> Moore and Youngman, "Guide."

<sup>156</sup> Maciej Falkowski, *On the Periphery of Global Jihad: The North Caucasus: The Illusion of Stabilisation* (Warsaw: Centre for Eastern Studies, 2014), 12.

<sup>157</sup> Brian Whitmore, "The Tao of Ramzan," *Radio Free Euopre/Radio Liberty*, February 2, 2016, <https://bit.ly/2GHDiqw>.

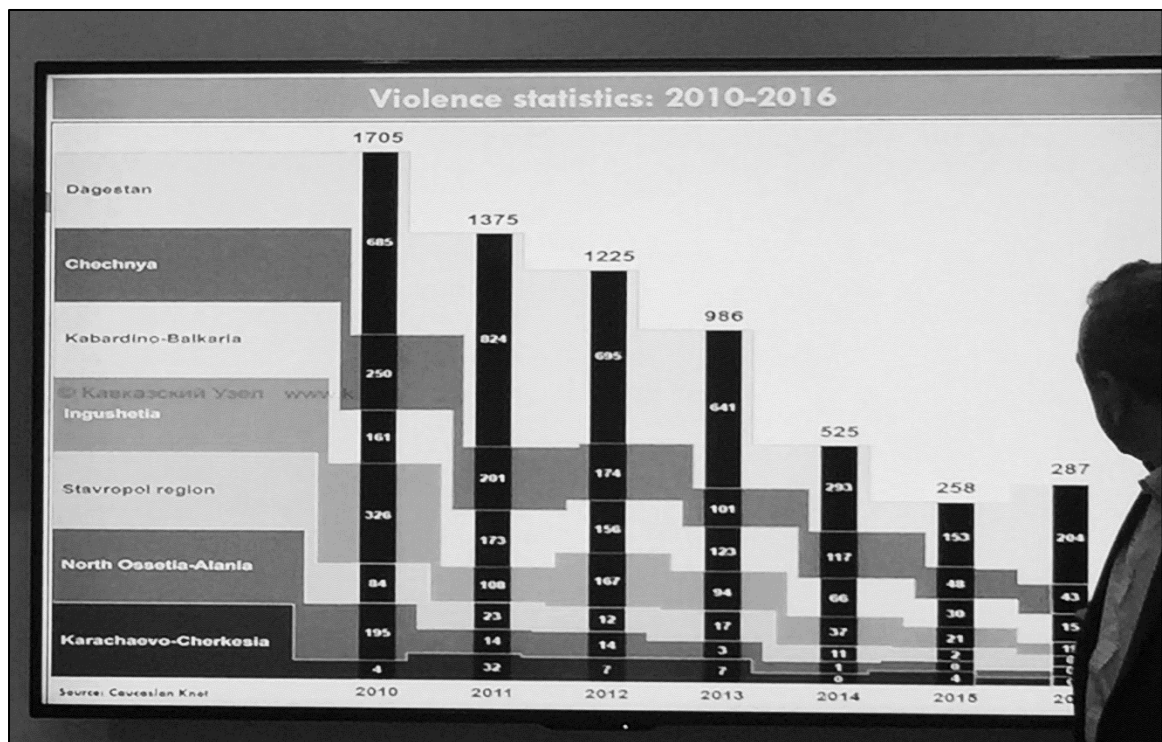


Figure 4 Violence Statistics in the North Caucasus from 2010-2016  
 Photo of slide from “Russia’s North Caucasus: Inner Decolonization, Nationalism, and Islam,” Presented by Sufian Zhemukhov at George Washington University, Elliot School of International Affairs, Washington, DC. March 30, 2018. From the author’s collection.

As part of their efforts to quell the violence, Kadyrov has implemented a number of policies in order to counter the extremist rhetoric and discourse within Chechnya. His attempts to corral jihadism are a collection of policies as eccentric as the man himself. There is an incredible amount of attention paid to the younger generations and an equal amount of money spent on their development. The Republic has created its own ministry, and allocates two percent of its budget on youth programs designed to increase employment, foster a “cultural revival” and to develop and sustain a new spiritual

context.<sup>158</sup> Kadyrov has also had a personal hand in espousing the role Islam plays in contemporary Chechen public life, from building Europe's largest mosque in downtown Grozny, to handpicking muftis and imams who will only preach off closely regulated talking points.<sup>159</sup> Kadyrov is attempting to remove all "foreign" elements of Islam, and encourage a return to the Sufism traditionally practiced in Chechnya.

As of 2018, the situation certainly seems to be improving. Hughes states that "radicals require a radicalized context in which to thrive."<sup>160</sup> And after twenty years of instability and anarchy, the people of Chechnya have reached their limit. One of Katherine Layton's interviewees states: "The people are tired. Many people have psychological problems; this war has been continuing for a long time. The people are ill; people are dying from stress."<sup>161</sup> Others share the sentiment that Kadyrov is the strongman that the republic needs now, "Chechens need a strong leader right now, and Kadyrov is that leader—he stands in the way of extremists, traitors and criminals, and that is what is needed."<sup>162</sup> Another says, "Kadyrov has stopped the war, and brought order and reconstruction to the republic."<sup>163</sup>

The reduction in violence over the years does not warrant silence. Stability, and indeed *normalcy*, seems to have returned. Despite these indicators, however, there is an

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<sup>158</sup> Peter Naderer. "The Impact of Authoritarian Rule on Political Identity among Chechen Youth." Paper presented at the ASN World Convention, Columbia University, April 2013.

<sup>159</sup> Joshua Yaffa, "Putin's Dragon," *The New Yorker*, April 8, 2016, <https://bit.ly/2K5VsUT>.

<sup>160</sup> Hughes, *Nationalism*, 105.

<sup>161</sup> Layton, *Chechens*, 49.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

<sup>163</sup> Layton, *Chechens*, 47.

estimated 400 number of Chechens who have been reported among the ranks of groups like the Islamic State. Why they have decided to go is a question of speculation.

What is not speculation, however, is the current status of the Caucasus Emirate. Until recently, this group was one of the sole propagators of jihadist activity in the region. Kadyrov's aggressive targeting of this group has yielded some positive results: they are unable to launch attacks the same way they were in the early 2000s.<sup>164</sup> Leaders are often killed and they have struggled for years to bring on new recruits—another indicator of Kadyrov's success.<sup>165</sup> However, the fact that the foreign fighters have gone to IS might suggest that the fighters are rejecting the group, but not what it stands for.

The number of fighters from the Caucasus poses a conundrum for the Kadyrov administration. They are an indicator that Kadyrov's policies may not be as far-reaching or as deeply-penetrative as desired. Instead of properly stifling Wahhabist sentiment, Kadyrov may have exacerbated it, which leaves Moscow in an equally awkward position. They have given their support and their funds to a man who not only constantly undermines their legitimacy to rule in Chechnya, but he may be unable to do the one real objective he's been tasked with.<sup>166</sup> In turn, this puzzle provides a comfortable place to leave Chechnya for a moment, and to transition to the second half of this thesis—that of a discussion regarding foreign fighters, their motivations for travel, and what makes them as concerning to governments like the Russian Federation (or Chechen Republic) as they are.

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<sup>164</sup> Falkowski, *The Illusion of Stabilisation*, 10.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>166</sup> Whitmore, "The Tao of Ramzan."

### CHAPTER THREE: IN THEIR OWN WORDS

The Caucasus Emirate was the main body of jihadism within Chechnya—and the broader North Caucasus—for years. However, it has lost considerable capabilities and capacity. This has been due to a combined—though surely in no ways coordinated—effort between Russian special forces and the Republic’s president, Ramzan Kadyrov. Special forces have targeted the CE’s leadership, and Kadyrov has gone after individuals and their families. Additionally, Kadyrov has implemented a number of political, social and religious initiatives to rob the CE of their legitimacy and relevancy. These moves have weakened the CE substantially, and led many to wonder if the Caucasus Emirate was, in fact, dead. However, the outbreak of civil war in Syria alongside the rise of the Islamic State (IS) has demonstrated that, while the CE might be handicapped, the discourse and frameworks that gave birth to it have not faded. Sentiment for fighting the *jihad* continues to linger among them, and thus, a noted 400 Chechens went to Syria to continue their duty as *mujahideen*. Which raises the question—why?

There are three expectations held before delving into this question. The first is that Chechens, like their counterparts in Egypt, Turkey, Germany and France, were drawn to fight by the context of the Syrian Civil War. One would expect to find remarks against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad personally, his actions against the Syrians, or even the Alawites. The second involves the Russians. With their military’s introduction

to the war in support for the Assad regime in 2015, it does not seem unlikely that a Chechen fighter might state their motivation to travel to Syria is rooted in a desire for revenge against the Russians. The third and final expectation is that fighters are drawn to the prestige and capability to fight that a foreign theater would provide. After all, the efforts of President Kadyrov and Russian forces have successfully driven what remains of the Emirate to the mountains, and Chechens do maintain a well-respected reputation outside their borders as opposed to the derision they are held with within Russia.

### **Methodology**

#### **“Chechens in Syria”**

Chechens in Syria (CiS) is a blog run by Joanna Paraszczuk. It catalogues news articles and propaganda documents regarding the movements and statements of Russian-speaking jihadists in Syria and Iraq. As a native Russian speaker, Paraszczuk either directly translates documents or reports on them. Sometimes she provides the original text and other times she only provides links to the documents. CiS has been recognized by the Europe Program and the Center for Strategic and International Studies as the most comprehensive collection of open source information regarding Russian-speaking foreign fighters available in English.<sup>167</sup>

On her Twitter profile, Paraszczuk describes herself as a London-based “journalist and researcher tracking Russian-speaking foreign fighters in Syria.” Her writing has been featured on The Atlantic, Jihadology and runs Radio Free Europe/Radio

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<sup>167</sup> Thomas M. Sanderson and Olga Oliker, Maxwell B. Markusen, Maria Donnelly, *Russian-Speaking Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria: Assessing the Threat from (and to) Russia and Central Asia* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2017), 3.



Liberty's "Under the Black Flag" blog. "Under the Black Flag" is a space for news, opinion and analysis about the impact of the Islamic State (IS) not only within Syria and Iraq, but in the greater Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and beyond. The information that Paraszczuk collects is open source, often news articles from Russian media or propaganda from Russian jihadi websites, including now defunct social media posts from Twitter, Facebook and its Russian alternative, *vKontakte*.

In order to pare down the data to be analyzed, only posts with these tags will be explored: *islamic state* [sic], *is* [sic], *islamic state of iraq and ash sham* [sic] and *u2uuu* (*Islamskoe Gosydarstvo Iraka i Shama*). The full Codebook can be found in Appendix D.

### **Grounded Theory**

The notes from CiS will be analyzed for recurring themes and prominent patterns using a methodology known as "grounded theory." Grounded theory is described as a "general theory" that can be used with either qualitative or quantitative data, though it is mostly associated with qualitative analysis. It is an iterative process, wherein the researcher is intended to keep posing questions to solidify their theory. Once the researcher has reached the point where no more questions can be asked, their data will be coded in three, additionally iterative, processes:

1. *Open Coding*: like data is sorted into similar categories
2. *Axial Coding*: grouped categories are named

*Selective Coding*: data is organized and coherently articulated in such a manner that speaks to a broader theory about the observed phenomena.

## **Inclusion Criteria**

In order to determine if a quote should be included for analysis, it must be determined that they are foreign fighters of Chechen ethnicity from the Chechen Republic and traveled to either Syria or Iraq to fight for the Islamic State. The definitions of these criteria are described below.

### ***“Foreign Fighter”***

*Foreign fighter* and *foreign fighting* will be understood as Thomas Hegghammer described with a slight modification. Hegghammer describes this phenomena as such: “A foreign fighters is one who engages in foreign fighting: ‘any military activity (training or fighting), using any tactic (terrorist or guerrilla tactics), against any enemy (Western or non-Western)—so long as it occurs outside the West.’”<sup>168</sup> The paper in which Hegghammer described this definition was in reference to the exploration of Western foreign fighters, thus the emphasis on Western action and location. This is where the modification will come in. For the purposes of this study, “outside the West” will be broadened to include “the individual’s place of residence.”

### ***“Chechen”***

*Chechen* will refer to individuals of this ethnic affiliation who were either born and/or raised and/or lived within the recognized borders of the Russian Autonomous Republic of Chechnya. While Hegghammer includes co-ethnic war volunteers (e.g., American-Iraqis going to Iraq) in his definition, for the purposes of this study, they will be excluded from analysis. There is a substantial diaspora community in Jordan, Turkey,

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<sup>168</sup> Hegghammer, “Should I Stay?,” 1.

the Central Asian Republics and Russia itself; their circumstances and history provide a number of variables that go beyond the capabilities and scope of this thesis.

However, there is a community that lies on the border between Chechnya and the Republic of Georgia that necessitates inclusion into the study—the *Kists*. The Kists call the Pankisi Gorge, located in neighboring Georgia, home.<sup>169</sup> They are part of the same ethno-linguistic family as the Chechens and Ingush (a family known as *Vainakh*).<sup>170</sup> Approximately 5,000 Kists live in the Gorge and claim Islam as their faith, as opposed to the primarily Orthodox Christians residing in the rest of Georgia.<sup>171</sup> Many of those living there are refugees or the second generation of refugees, as the First and Second Wars pushed thousands of Chechens into the valley.

This valley might have retained its anonymity and might not warrant inclusion into the dataset, had it not been for the sentiments harbored by and the activities undertaken by a considerable swath of the community. Since the mid-1990s, a strong note of anti-Russian and jihadist affect has suffused the Kists.<sup>172</sup> Terror groups such as al-Qaeda found Pankisi to be a considerable base of operations.<sup>173</sup> In early 2003, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (the future leader of the Islamic State in Iraq, the al-Qaeda aligned progenitor to IS) was noted to have been “active” in the Gorge.<sup>174</sup> Additionally, some of

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<sup>169</sup> Shorena Kurtsikidzs and Vakhtang Chikovani, “Georgia’s Pankisi Gorge: An Ethnographic Survey,” *Berkeley Program in Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies Working Paper Series*. (Berkley: University of California, 2002), 3.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>172</sup> Emil Souleimanov, “Globalizing Jihad? North Caucasians in the Syrian Civil War,” *Middle East Policy* 21 no. 3, 1-8.

<sup>173</sup> Sheila MacVicar and Henry Schuster, “European Terror Suspects Got al-Qaeda Training, Sources Say,” *CNN*, February 6, 2003, <https://cnn.it/2GDqRjC>.

<sup>174</sup> Jim Nichol, *Georgia’s Pankisi Gorge: Russian Concerns and U.S. Interests*. (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service. 2003), <https://bit.ly/2HirGKT>.

IS's most prominent figures, such as Omar al-Shishani, are from the Pankisi Gorge.<sup>175</sup>

Therefore, because of the closeness of their experiences with their Chechen cousins, the Kists are included in the analysis.

### ***“The Islamic State”***

Although it has already been referred to above, a more focused definition of the *Islamic State* must be provided here. As their goal was to create a functioning state, IS recruiters did call for individuals beyond soldiers; in 2014, NPR reported that IS “provide[d] services and have taken control of schools and impose taxes. The group has staffed a police force and even directs traffic.”<sup>176</sup> However, for the purposes of the study, attention will only be paid to parts of the organization involved with terrorist or insurgent operations. The study will also differentiate between the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq and the Islamic State Caucasus Province, also known as the *Vilayat Kavkaz* (and is sometimes spelled *Wilayat*). Though IS' encroachment into the Caucasus region is certainly worth of investigation, this thesis is about foreign fighters on foreign soil.

### **Limitations**

As with most investigations into the acts of jihadis, the amount of information that is available in the open source environment is difficult to come by. While Paraszczuk's blog has attained high regard from CSIS and Paraszczuk is well-respected among those studying terrorism in the Northern Caucasus, there seems to be little material publically available to analyze. It is also possible to attribute the lack of accounts of Chechen

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<sup>175</sup> Rayhan Demytrie, “Jihadist Shadow Hangs over Georgia's Pankisi Gorge.” *BBC*, April 21, 2016, <https://bbc.in/1T11an7>.

<sup>176</sup> Deborah Amos, “Islamic State Rule: Municipal Services and Public Beheadings.” *NPR*, September 12, 2014. <http://n.pr/2CdIu2z>.

foreign fighters in Russian mainstream media is that Chechens are expected to act this way. In the United States, foreign fighters remain a rare phenomenon, so when a person makes it overseas, it is worthy of a front-page spread in the *New York Times*.<sup>177</sup>

Verification is difficult, if not impossible, to secure. For example, Paraszczuk reported that it is common for former fighters in Syria to fake their deaths, buy forged documents, and sneak into Turkey.<sup>178</sup> This is why Russian officials will not take IS claims of fallen mujahideen at face value. For further consideration, Omar Shishani has been reported killed in action several times, and although IS admitted his death in 2016, neither the United States nor Russia considers this statement enough proof of its occurrence.<sup>179</sup>

Another limitation is found in the source of data itself. As stated earlier, this thesis intends to utilize reporting compiled by Joanna Paraszczuk. While this thesis does not doubt Paraszczuk's integrity in translating, a noted amount of reliance is placed on her judgment on what to report. In some cases, like her March 2014 article, entitled "Motorcycle Mujahideen," Paraszczuk describes an online diary of a young Russian-speaker connected with a North Caucasian unit within Jabhat al-Nusra.<sup>180</sup> She only translates a few of the young man's entries and does not provide links to the original source.

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<sup>177</sup> Scott Shane, "From Minneapolis to ISIS: An American's Path to Jihad." *The New York Times*, March 21, 2015. <https://nyti.ms/2HeUiFK>.

<sup>178</sup> Joanna Paraszczuk, "Video: Russian IS Fighter from Kaspiysk, Dagestan Arrested Trying to Cross into Turkey," *Chechens in Syria* (blog), January 8, 2018. <https://bit.ly/2HRpICt>.

<sup>179</sup> "Omar al-Shishani," Counter Extremism Project, last modified February 21, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2HG41aW>.

<sup>180</sup> Joanna Paraszczuk, "Motorcycle Mujahideen: Diary of A Russian-Speaking Jihadi in Aleppo." *Chechens in Syria* (blog), March 11, 2014. <https://bit.ly/2K6Mebh>.

One of the more frustrating aspects of studying jihadists from this particular part of the world is how the fighters are often conflated under the banner of “Chechen” or “from Chechnya.” Because the Chechen Wars were such high profile events, it is easier for those not familiar with the area (including journalists!) to identify any Russian speaking jihadist as “Chechen” or to refer to the area as “Chechnya.” Indeed, a fighter from the Caucasus writes that “Arabs call North Caucasians ‘Shishani’ and the Turks, ‘Circassian.’” Paraszczuk expresses her frustration with this plurality:

“Chechens” is often used as something of a catch-all term for “Russian-speaking foreign fighters and/or foreign fighters from the former USSR”, and (b) actually very little is known about WHO [sic] these fighters are, where they are fighting, their groups and so on.

Jihadi foreign fighters often given themselves a war name, known as a *kunya*. It is usually an Arabic name from the Quran or Islamic folklore and often marks where the individual is from. For example, “Omar al-Shishani” is, therefore, Omar the Chechen. His legal name is Tarkhan Batirashvili, and he is a Kist. He is from Georgia, not Chechnya.<sup>181</sup> Because of the degree of notoriety of these wars, and how brutally both sides fought, Chechens have earned a reputation for strength, determination and soldiering expertise. Therefore, to add “al-Shishani” to one’s *kunya* is to claim that reputation. To consider Omar al-Shishani as al-Gruzinetz would be a grave insult! Another example comes from Shishani’s “right hand man” and the individual heading the

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<sup>181</sup> “Omar al-Shishani,” Counter Extremism Project.

Russian-speaking propaganda unit from Syria. His name is Islam Seit-Umarovich Atabiyev, and is Karachay, but goes by the name Abu Jihad al-Shishani.<sup>182</sup>

Furthermore, in some cases, IS fighters are reluctant to mention their ethnicities at all. After all, IS is supposed to be an international jihadist organization, a “melting pot” into which all peoples become one *ummah*.

Finally, there are the practical limitations of using transliterated names. Take for instance, the name *Умар*. It can be transliterated as Umar or Omar. I counted at least three different spellings of Seyfullah Shishani. Sometimes, *al-* is added to the *kunya* (ie, Seyfullah al-Shishani). Other times it is not.

### **Findings**

In total, 56 motivations were counted and analyzed on CiS. Twenty main themes were identified and seven categories were identified.

### **Open Coding**

During the first pass of Open Coding, key phrases were bolded to identify the theme of that quote. For example:

- “Those who wage jihad only in one country are not real Muslims because they are concerned with ‘patriotism and nationalism.’ **Instead ISIS seek to be under ‘the flag of *tawhid* (monotheism).**”<sup>183</sup>
- “Come to Sham [Syria] to **establish the word of Allah.**”<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>182</sup> Anna Borschevskaya, *The Future of Chechens in ISIS*. (Washington, DC: Washington Institute, 2017), 14.

<sup>183</sup> Joanna Paraszczuk, “Syria: ISIS Chechens – We’re Not Jihadis, We’re Muwahideen [sic],” *Chechens in Syria* (blog), May 23, 2014. <https://bit.ly/2HiWfnR>.

<sup>184</sup> Joanna Paraszczuk, “ISIS Fighter in Deir Ezzor: ‘Joulani, Jaish al-Muhajireen Are Apostates,’” *Chechens in Syria* (blog), June 7, 2014. <https://bit.ly/2qRXoI6>.

- “Our aim is to liberate this land...and **raise the word of Allah**. If each of us did what we could, the Jihad would go very easily.”<sup>185</sup>
- “Allah urged him to unite with ‘those brothers who are **building a state now, not at some point later**.’”<sup>186</sup>

On the second pass of Open Coding, repetition of words, phrases or sentiments were identified in order to begin grouping. The above examples all indicate that the speaker believes the Islamic State to be “the correct path,” the “true jihad” or acting in some way on behalf of Allah. These quotes, and the other eight like them, were grouped together as “*IS is righteous*.”

There were two cases where a clear motivation was neither described by the individual nor by those who might have known him. The reporting also did not use phrases along the lines of “it is believed” or “it is speculated.” The reporting instead made mention of surround circumstances, such as an outstanding arrest warrant, or noting the difficulties the individual would face at home should they return. I believed these circumstances indicated a reason to travel. They were recorded as “*Speculation*.” For example:

- “Testimony from one of [Omar al-Shishani’s] former associates **paints him as a bully who likes power**. We also know that Umar [sic] has a **taste for luxury**

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<sup>185</sup> Joanna Paraszczuk, “ISIS Chechen Training Montage with Ibragim Shishani,” *Chechens in Syria* (blog), April 20, 2014. <https://bit.ly/2qTltOJ>.

<sup>186</sup> Joanna Paraszczuk, “Syria: Why ISIS Cares about Tiny North Caucasus Jamaat Pledge to Umar Shishani,” *Chechens in Syria* (blog), March 23, 2014. <https://bit.ly/2vzXeKV>.



**acquired at any cost** (sometime in spring/early summer 2013, he acquired a large, luxury villa in Haritan, Aleppo by ousting its legal owner).”<sup>187</sup>

The analysis drawn is that al-Shishani joined the Islamic State because he is a power-hungry individual with a penchant for luxury, and IS allowed him the space to act as such.

In four cases where individuals or the reporting made no indication of ideological motivations, but rather that they personally knew someone already embedded in IS, and that was their impetus to join are noted as “*Personal connections*.” An example:

- “The explanation that I was given was that al-Bara **was persuaded to join IS by Umar Shishani** [sic], whom he had known since childhood.”<sup>188</sup>

In total, 21 themes were identified:

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| 1. IS is righteous                               | 11. Sham is a “Holy Land”                            |
| 2. IS is internationalist                        | 12. North Caucasus is a backwater                    |
| 3. IS is strong                                  | 13. No opportunities to wage jihad in North Caucasus |
| 4. CE is weak                                    | 14. To wage jihad                                    |
| 5. CE is internationalist                        | 15. To become a martyr                               |
| 6. Disagreements with CE                         | 16. Establish <i>shari’a</i>                         |
| 7. CE infighting                                 | 17. Establish the Caliphate                          |
| 8. Other groups (including CE) are not righteous | 18. Anti-Assad                                       |
| 9. CE is lazy/not the real jihad                 | 19. Humanitarian support                             |
| 10. Jihad in Syria is more prestigious           | 20. Personal connections                             |
|  | 21. Speculation                                      |

On the third pass of Open Coding, these themes were divided into like-categories:

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<sup>187</sup> Joanna Paraszczuk, “In Russia & Raqqa, the Umar Shishani Myth Continues,” *Chechens in Syria* (blog), November 17, 2014. <https://bit.ly/2HQwzMi>.

<sup>188</sup> Joanna Paraszczuk, “Update al-Bara Pankisi, His Wife & Children Confirmed Alive in Syria,” *Chechens in Syria* (blog), August 30, 2017. <https://bit.ly/2qS9h0s>.

**Table 1 Open Coding Grouping**

<b>Group 1</b>	
These statements spoke positively of IS and indicated that the individual had aligned themselves with the group for the group's sake. They <i>chose</i> IS.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. IS is righteous</li> <li>2. IS is internationalist</li> <li>3. IS is strong</li> <li>4. To establish the Caliphate</li> </ol>
<b>Group 2</b>	
These statements spoke negatively of CE and indicated that the individual had aligned themselves with IS because the CE did not appeal to them. They <i>did not chose</i> CE.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. CE is weak</li> <li>2. CE is nationalist</li> <li>3. CE infighting</li> <li>4. Other groups (including the CE) are not righteous</li> <li>5. CE is lazy /not the true jihad</li> </ol>
<b>Group 3</b>	
These statements did not speak directly to the individual's reason for fighting with IS or a rejection of CE per se, but indicate that they believe Syria to be the proper theater of jihad. Interestingly, these statements do not mention the ongoings of the Syrian Civil War.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Jihad in Syria is more prestigious</li> <li>2. "Sham" is the holy land</li> </ol>
<b>Group 4</b>	
These statements did not speak directly to the individual's reason for fighting with IS or a rejection of CE, per se, but indicate frustrations in the limited capacity to fight jihad in the Northern Caucasus.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. North Caucasus is a backwater</li> <li>2. No opportunities to wage jihad in the North Caucasus</li> </ol>
<b>Group 5</b>	
These statements speak directly to the conflict of the Syrian Civil War.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Anti-Assad statements</li> <li>2. To offer humanitarian support</li> </ol>
<b>Group 6</b>	
These statements do not indicate a particular inclination toward Syria or to the Islamic State or the rejection of the Caucasus Emirate and the Caucasus locale. These individuals simply state that they want an opportunity to fight in the jihad.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. To wage jihad</li> <li>2. To establish <i>shari'a</i></li> <li>3. To become a martyr</li> </ol>
<b>4. Group 7</b>	
Miscellaneous	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Personal connections</li> <li>2. Speculations</li> </ol>

	3. Disagreements with the CE (one person was mentioned to have rejected CE due to personal disagreements with the organization).
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### **Axial Coding**

During the Axial Coding phase, the categories were named:

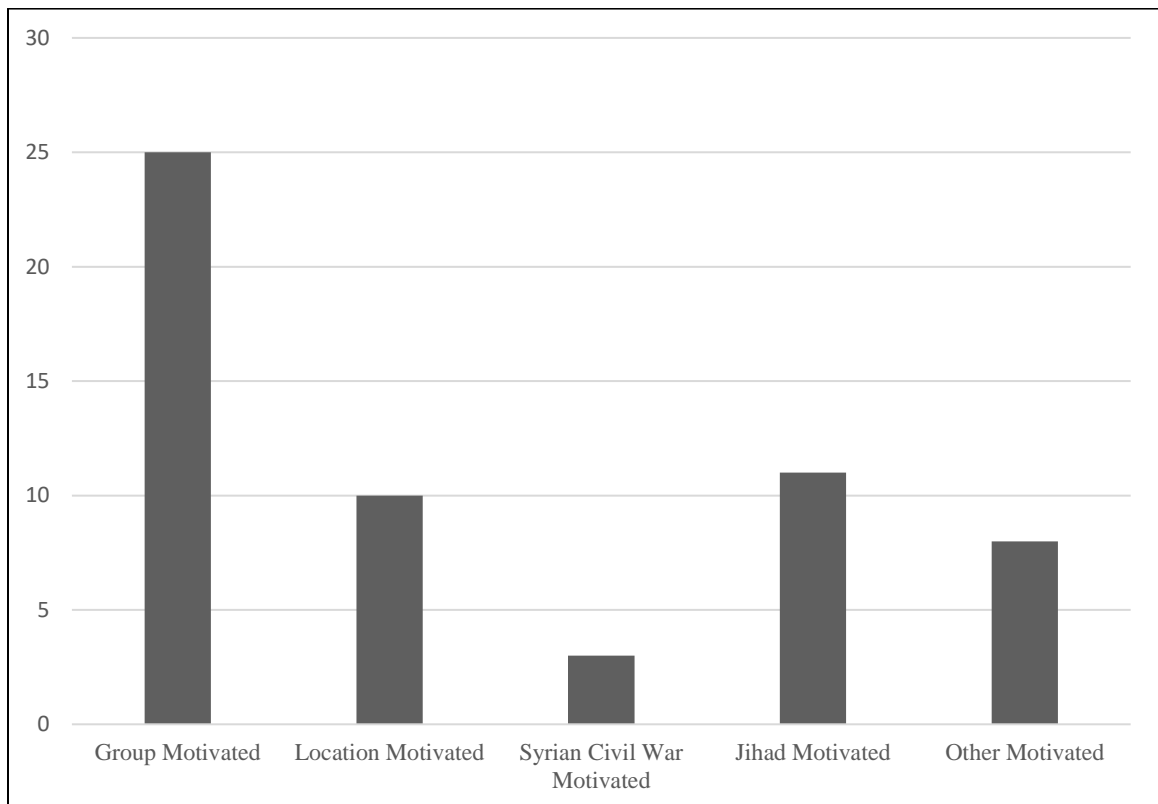
1. Pro-Islamic State
2. Anti-Caucasus Emirate
3. Pro-Syria
4. Anti-North Caucasus
5. Syrian Civil War
6. Generic jihadi rhetoric
7. Other

These groups could be further categorized as:

1. Group Motivated
  - a. Pro-Islamic State
  - b. Anti-Caucasus Emirate
2. Location Motivated
  - a. Pro-Syria
  - b. Anti-North Caucasus
3. Syrian Civil War

4. Jihad Motivated

5. Other Motivated



**Figure 5 Count of Chechen Foreign Fighter Motivations (by group)**

### **Selective Coding**

In Selective Coding, the data is organized and coherently articulated in such a manner that speaks to a broader theory about the observed phenomena. The order that I have compiled them is not based on the frequency of themes, although that is how it appears, but on their centrality to the Islamic State's influence. In other words, statements

that demonstrate that individuals are making the choice to align themselves with the Islamic State. Their motivations were the clearest.

The statements under *Location Motivated* seemed less inclined to a particular group; these individuals simply wanted the chance to leave the Caucasus. Group affiliation was such an afterthought it was not mentioned directly. *Jihad Motivated* statements were generic, in that they used the tropes of past jihadists and are not grounded in the particular conflict (either in the Caucasus or Syria). These are statements that could be applied to any conflict. *Other Motivated* statements are so personal and circumstantial that they cannot be generalized. Islamic State affiliation seems neither prompted by the situation in Syria or ideological persuasion. They simply “knew a guy.”

### **Analysis**

#### **Refining the Research Question**

During the implementation of the research, a number of factors were discovered that challenge the original research question and make the impetus behind a Chechen’s decision to join IS difficult to assess. Chechens arrived in Syria in 2013, a full year before al-Baghdadi declared the Caliphate. The name of the original contingent of Chechen fighters was Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar (JMA).<sup>189</sup> There are also contested stories regarding the position of the Caucasus Emirate leader, Doku Umarov, regarding the Syrian Civil War: some accounts detail that Omar al-Shishani was instructed to travel;

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<sup>189</sup> Murad Batal al-Shishani, “‘Obliged to Unite under One Banner’: A Profile of Syria’s Jaysh al-Muhajireen wa’l-Ansar,” The Jamestown Foundation, April 19, 2013. <https://bit.ly/2r3le3E>

others say the first wave of fighters left independently. Nevertheless, the first wave of fighters affiliated themselves as Caucasus Emirate fighters.

Though the decision to come to Syria might not have been prompted by the presence or influence of IS at first, a significant number of individuals still chose to ally themselves with al-Baghdadi anyway. However, while there, they still chose to align themselves with IS over the dozens of smaller *jama'ats* and organizations. What was so special about the Islamic State?

Additionally, it is interesting to note that none of the collected fighters had gone to Iraq. Although the inclusion criteria were left open for such fighters, their instances did not occur. This may be because the first wave entered Syrian territory, prompted by the war, and before the establishment of the Caliphate and the incursion into Iraq. The initial network connections funneled into Syria, thus leaving Iraq as an afterthought.

Therefore, the research question ought to be restructured in order to reflect this new data. Instead of simply asking, *why are Chechens fighting in Syria and Iraq with the Islamic State*, the research question should be twofold:

*Why are Chechens fighting in Syria, and while there, why do some choose to fight for the Islamic State?*

## Evaluations

In all, the count for each group appears as such:

**Table 2 Axial Coding Count**

GROUP	COUNT
Group Motivated	27
<i>Pro-Islamic State</i>	19
<i>Anti-Caucasus Emirate</i>	8

Location Motivated	10
<i>Pro-Syria</i>	2
<i>Anti-North Caucasus</i>	8
Syrian Civil War	3
Jihad Motivated	11
Other Motivated	7

Perhaps the most striking finding was the frequency in which the righteousness of IS was invoked. This conclusion might be biased, however, due to a disproportionate number of articles tied to Omar Shishani, who, as a significant field commander of IS would be compelled to speak of its honor. However, other sentiments proclaiming IS' physical and moral strength, as well as positive feelings towards IS' goals are indications of a compulsion to, rather than a rejection of. In other words, Chechens in Syria are drawn to what the Islamic State has to offer regardless of other context or circumstance.

Interestingly, there was repeated regret regarding the lack of opportunity to fight in the North Caucasus. Syria simply provided the arena to plan and to act without restriction from either Russian security forces or Kadyrov's henchmen. One fighter, who bounced around several organizations and jihadi fronts remarked:

- And I swear by Allah, I personally do not see a lot of help and great prospects for the Jihad [sic] in the Caucasus, except in association with the Caliphate and the private *bay'at* should in no way deter us from this association.<sup>190</sup>

As the examination through Paraszczuk's blog continued, one of the more striking elements that rose to the fore was the medium in which these statements were gathered.

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<sup>190</sup> Joanna Paraszczuk, "Islamic State Chechen: Caucasians in Syria Should Give Bay'at to Baghdadi Not CE," *Chechens in Syria* (blog), August 21, 2017. <https://bit.ly/2JgZQiQ>.

The motivations, the positive words rendered to IS, were often phrased in “we” statements. Instances of these “we” statements are demonstrated below:

- *We* didn't come here to have our own *jama'at*, but *we* came here to wage jihad such that it would have the maximum use for our *ummah* and our religion.<sup>191</sup>
- *Our* aim is to liberate this land...and raise the word of Allah. If each of us did what we could, the Jihad would go very easily.<sup>192</sup>
- *We* don't want to kill people, we just want to establish Sharia law.<sup>193</sup>

The “we” statements made by these Chechens were indicative of a propaganda piece. These men were not trying to uncover deep truths within themselves or their situation to an empathetic audience. Rather, they were engaged in a battle of words with the other jihadist groups in Syria. They were using the constructs of their movement to justify their movement; and were attempting to brand themselves as the most legitimate.

However, there were few instances where individual fighters spoke for their individual circumstance. These men seemed more motivated by practicality than by ideology, as one fighter says:

- I went to the Caucasus, because I know how hard it is for us at home and I wanted to help and take part in that. I spent a bit of time with the city *mujahideen* and *they couldn't get me to the mountains, and they could not come down. So I went to*

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<sup>191</sup> Joanna Paraszczuk, “Umar Shishani to Kebekov: ‘I Didn’t Have Bay’ah to Umarov When I Came to Syria,” *Chechens in Syria* (blog), June 7, 2015. <https://bit.ly/2qLtC8D>.

<sup>192</sup> Paraszczuk, “ISIS Chechen Training Montage.

<sup>193</sup> Joanna Paraszczuk, “ISIS: ‘We Don’t Want to Kill People, We Just Want to Establish Sharia,’” *Chechens in Syria* (blog), March 26, 2014. <https://bit.ly/2HSuzDh>.



*Syria*. Thank Allah, I am the happiest guy. I'm on Allah's path [emphasis added].<sup>194</sup>

Also of interest came in what was *not* said. One of the expectations held entering this study was that Chechens were eager to fight Russians again. However, this did not come to fruition. There was but one case recorded where the Russians were even mentioned, and it was not in relation to enacting revenge. Magomed Diresov, *kunya* Abu Umar Grozny, says, "Why is Russia bombing the rebels in Idlib and the U.S. apparently does not see this?"<sup>195</sup> Thus, the Russian component for viable motivations is removed.

### **Why are Chechens Fighting in Syria with the Islamic State?**

It is still unknown why exactly Chechens first started appearing in Syria in 2013 and why some stayed back. The literature on foreign fighters says that they are much more likely to be compelled into a conflict rather than pushed into one. But what compulsion could have been strong enough to entice Russian nationals to join the fray? There seems to be three possibilities—the factors of the Syrian Civil War itself (fighting against Syria's president and his forces), the chance to fight the Russians in another theater or the continuance of the jihad. However, within the articles published on "Chechens in Syria," instances of the latter *never* happened and about the former, only *three* articles mentioned wanting to support the opposition to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. If these Chechens did not make the journey to fight the Russians or al-Assad, the drivers that remain then are variations on the theme of jihad.,

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<sup>194</sup> Joanna Paraszczuk, "ISIS Chechen: Real Men Wage Jihad in Syria if They Can't Go to Caucasus," *Chechens in Syria* (blog), May 13, 2014. <https://bit.ly/2HHpkZC>.

<sup>195</sup> Joanna Paraszczuk, "Has Core of 'Sayfullah's Jamaat' Defected to ISIS?" *Chechens in Syria* (blog), May 30, 2014. <https://bit.ly/2HTh4n4>.

There are many battalions and organizations on the ground in Syria; therefore, a decision was made by the Chechens on whom to affiliate themselves with. Some wanted to stay independent; others fought with Jabhat al-Nusra (now Jabhat Fateh al-Sham). Others still came to Syria to fight for the Islamic State directly. Throughout the posts on Paraszczuk's website, however, there was a strong theme that the Caucasus Emirate simply could not provide what the Chechens insurgents were seeking. The organization itself was weak, made all the more handicapped by the brutal implementation of Grozny and Moscow's counterinsurgency operations. Ramzan Kadyrov even publicly stated that Chechnya was "the only region in the world where terrorism has been completely defeated" and that "there is no terrorist underground" either.<sup>196</sup> If the goal of the Caucasus Emirate was to wage jihad, and this desire remained captivating for its members, it simply could not be done in-house; it needed to go abroad.

Contrary to Kadyrov's bold assessments, this research demonstrates that jihadism in Chechnya is not the product of a moment, but is instead, a movement. The seeds of the modern jihadist movement were planted in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Missionaries bearing Salafist messages from deeply Islamist states built their credibility while dissolving the trust among the Sufists. In the wake of the First Chechen War, the discourse had been set that Islam was a vehicle for revolutionary change. In addition to forces unleashed in the botched recovery of that conflict, the friendship forged between Basayev and al-Khattab further fomented the movement by bringing in military

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<sup>196</sup> Caucasian Knot, "Ramzan Kadyrov announces victory over terrorism in Chechnya," November 7, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2HBaJPt>.

experience, funds and members. After their deaths in the mid-2000s, the surviving Caucasus Emirate was believed to be second-string. It was never as lethal or sensational as Basayev and al-Khattab's following.

Upwards of 400 individuals made the difficult journey to Syria from the Caucasus, proclaiming to come not in support of the Syrian people revolting against their brutal leader, but to establish *shari'a* and to fight the "infidels." The reasons that are stated describing their want to affiliate with the Islamic State are couched in the framework of jihad and with notions of righteousness.

These finding harkens back to Byman and Shapiro, "When conflicts end, some fighters may remain fully committed to global jihad and seek to aid Muslims embattled elsewhere."<sup>197</sup> Foreign fighters tend not to go home when the war is over, but they go, instead, in search of greater monsters to slay. Chechens are fighting in Syria because they have exhausted their capacity to "slay the Russian monster," and are in search of new avenues to fight and new foes. Syria provides the opportunity to fight and the Islamic State provides the best tools to do so.

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<sup>197</sup> Byman and Shapiro, *Be Afraid*, 21.

## CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSIONS

In the first part of this thesis, careful attention was given to the history and to the development of jihadism within Chechnya. This was done in order to claim that a discourse had been introduced to this mountainous Republic—certain words, symbols and inferences had begun to embed themselves in that society under *glasnost* and *perestroika*. These young (and sometimes not so young) Chechens had been brought into a larger, global Islamic *ummah* was out there, waiting with open arms to accept them, should they chose to disregard and shed their old habits and identity. Once idea has taken root, it is difficult, if not impossible to kill it. Even after twenty years of violence after the outbreak of Second Chechen War and twenty years of policies designed to deter adherence to this ideology, jihadism retains its potency in Chechnya.

At the offset, asking the question of why anyone does what they do can be problematic at best, and counterproductive at worst. It may be impossible to delve deeper than the levels of Islamic State socialization to uncover their true motivations, but even if it were possible, who are we as academics to divorce the two and judge the trueness?

It was not the intention of this thesis to merely catalogue the stated reasons for those Chechens fighting with the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. Rather, by analyzing these fighters' words, when their own genuine thoughts could be extracted, it can be better understood, among other things, the ways in which they see global affairs, how

they position themselves within that framework, and the depths of their own autonomy. From what has already been parsed from above, it can be extrapolated that these Chechen foreign fighters view themselves as members of the broader Islamic *ummah* (community) that can not only respond to Islamist rhetoric, but who ought to. This separates them from their jihadi peers that stayed in Chechnya, and distinguishes themselves further from Chechens who did not join any jihadist organization in the first place.

### **Opportunities for Future Work**

There are many opportunities for continued study into this question. The first and foremost comes in the avenue of field work. This call for closer, more personal ties to the research extends beyond Chechen foreign fighters, but is a desire for the entire field of terrorism studies. With further field research and honest questions posed for honest answers, it is hoped that the researcher can wade through the propaganda in order to find something closer to authenticity.

It would do well for researchers of the Caucasus to delve into the reasons why and the matters in which the Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar (JMA) made its way to Syria in the first place. Why and how, in other words, did Syria become Chechnya's war? It would also be instructive to uncover the waves of foreign fighters. Observations place the number of Chechens in Syria at close to 400; were these all part of the original wave of JMA in 2013, or did some come later? Did this trend stop after IS lost substantial territory and stopped calling for individuals to join their ranks? To understand this question repurposes the original question of this thesis.

There is a compulsion in academia to investigate questions regarding *why* individuals partake in certain activities and beliefs. In this case, because a significant number of Chechens remained in their homeland and because the Caucasus Emirate continues to survive despite strong efforts by the state to eradicate them, it may behoove us to look into why jihadists *did not* travel to Syria, let alone travel to Syria to fight with the Islamic State. Finally, this thesis lays the groundwork for a much broader question—*what is the state of jihadism in Chechnya as a whole?*

It would also be in researchers' interest to understand the motivations behind Chechen women leaving their homes and fighting for the Islamic State. The female element of the Chechen insurgency—the so-called “Black Widows”—is a well-known aspect of the Russo-Chechen conflict, but in the context of the Syrian Civil War is understudied.<sup>198</sup> As the current policy of the Kadyrov regime is to allow women and children formally affiliated with IS to return to the state without consequence, there is a greater opportunity to speak to them directly. The extent to which IS attracted women into their ranks, even though they forbade them from engaging in active conflict, was another point of concern among Western policymakers. Why did they go, and what insights does this question further reveal about the state of jihadism in Chechnya?

### **Policy Recommendations**

There is merit to studying a phenomenon for the sake of studying a phenomenon. However, due to the political nature of this project, it is appropriate to consider the

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<sup>198</sup> Anne Nivat, “The Black Widows: Chechen Women Join the Fight for Independence—and Allah,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 28, no. 5 (2005): 413-419, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10576100500180394>.

applications of that knowledge. Here, the question posed is transformed from a research “why” into policy “how”: *why* are Chechens fighting in Syria with the Islamic State becomes *how* can others respond to this trend? Two responses come to mind: addressing either the actions of those who adhere to jihadism or the ideology itself.

The preceding analysis suggests that Chechens are not fighting for the Islamic State because of the specific circumstances of the Syrian Civil War; they are traveling because it is a theater in which they can fully act as a jihadi. Therefore, addressing the ideology itself warrants consideration. In this scenario, programs would be developed to encourage deradicalization from the ideology, desistance from certain behaviors or disengagement from groups. In the long term, this is a policy that the Chechens and the Russians ought to consider, but there are mitigating circumstances that make this approach problematic in the short or even medium term.

Such programs typically fall under the banner of “countering violent extremism,” colloquially known as “CVE,” and this field is a rife with its own contradictions and contestations among practitioners and scholars. Questions regarding the designing of such programs, evaluating them and reliably replicating their results remain unanswered. There are few examples of deradicalization programs around the world, and even less that have conducted reliable evaluations or desirable results. The al-Ha’ir Rehabilitation Center in Saudi Arabia is perhaps the most well-known “jihadi rehab” program, but a

United States Department of Defense report found that one-in-five graduates of the program re-engaged in terrorist acts.<sup>199</sup>

In this sphere, details count. Mishaps and mishandlings can exacerbate surrounding social problems and even encourage radicalization, as was the case with the United Kingdom's CONTEST/PREVENT program. An evaluation carried out by Rights Watch United Kingdom (RWUK) found there was a disproportionate impact on Muslims students—the majority of those reported, referred and expelled from their schools were Muslim—exacerbating and in many cases, even promoting, discrimination in the classroom.<sup>200</sup> In order for the implementation of these programs to be successful, in that they achieve the goals of reducing jihadi adherents and terrorists, there must be access to considerable resources and a strong political will to carry this through, even in the face of inevitable setbacks and readjustments.

From this vantage point, there does not seem to be such a desire to implement such programs in either Moscow or Grozny. Even if Kremlin officials found this to be a worthwhile venture, there approaches additional problems. The history of colonialization and the brutality in which the Russians have ruled Chechnya would make for difficulties in achieving citizen buy-in. It would require a deft hand and a listening ear, a position Moscow does not hold with Chechnya, nor does that seem to be a position they would

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<sup>199</sup> Marisa L. Porges, *The Saudi Deradicalization Experiment* (Washington, DC: Council on Foreign Relations, 2010).

<sup>200</sup> *Preventing Education? Human Rights and UK Counter-Terrorism Policy in Schools* (London: Rights Watch UK, 2017).



hold in the near future. Even the face of Russia's democratic opposition, Alexei Navalny, says that Russia ought to "stop feeding the Caucasus."<sup>201</sup>

This leaves addressing the actions of those individuals who adhere to jihadism. The current policy Russia and Chechnya have involves pushing jihadis into the mountains or across their borders, in this case, to Syria.<sup>202</sup> This, however, positions the country and the republic for blowback. While it is rare for foreign fighters return home and to engage in a terror attack, it does happen, and those attacks tend to be more successfully implemented with higher counts of lethality. The perpetrators of the 2015 Paris attacks were returning IS members.<sup>203</sup> Additionally, casting these individuals out of the country gives them an opportunity to wreak havoc elsewhere, and there is no guarantee that the government will not have to face them in any regard: Chechen fighters went to Syria *before* Russia's military became actively involved in that theater.

To wage jihad may still be a potent message and motivation, despite the Islamic State's ostensible defeat. The Syrian Civil War continues and other jihadist groups remain active there, like Jabhat Fateh al-Sham. It is unknown how the flow of jihadis has changed through the course of this war, but there is a possibility for continuance. And there is always the possibility for another Syria, another Bosnia, another Afghanistan—another foreign conflict that engages jihadi audiences. Therefore, it is strongly recommended that steps be taken to limit the mobility of these would-be fighters. This

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<sup>201</sup> Robert Coalson, "Is Aleksei Navalny a Liberal or a Nationalist?" *The Atlantic*, July 29, 2013. <https://theatlantic.com/2GGduPx>.

<sup>202</sup> Maria Tsvetkova, "How Russia allowed homegrown radicals to go and fight in Syria," *Reuters*, May 13, 2016. <https://reut.rs/2KEKLJB>.

<sup>203</sup> Mariano Castillo, Margot Haddad, Michael Martinez and Steve Almasy, "Paris suicide bomber identified; ISIS claims responsibility for 129 dead," *CNN*, November 16, 2015, <https://cnn.it/2HIIQYa>.

can be achieved by strengthening the border between Russia and Georgia, specifically along the Pankisi Gorge. As discussed above (Chapter 3, *Inclusion Criteria*), the Pankisi Gorge is a safe haven for militants and jihadi radicalization. It is also a pathway into the South Caucasus and into the greater Middle East. It also continues to be outside of Tbilisi's full control.<sup>204</sup>

Encouraging firmer border integrity from the southern end, rather than addressing Russia directly, may be the most effective method to stemming the effect of foreign fighters. As an ally of the United States and a member-state of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), Georgia is positioned better to listen to such recommendations and to implement them adhering to the values of human rights and dignity. Additionally, as a member of the OSCE, Georgia has access to the many tools developed by the Organization with the goal of bolstering border management. The OSCE Border Management Staff College offers courses specifically on preventing the movement of foreign terrorist fighters.<sup>205</sup> Although Russia is also a member state of the OSCE, the abovementioned concerns about its political will remain, and the Chechen arena is one where the Organization and Moscow could not reach an agreement in the past. Disagreements regarding its mandate following the Second Chechen War led to its expiration and the withdrawal by the OSCE from that area in March 2003.<sup>206</sup>

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<sup>204</sup> Michael Hikari Cecire, "How Extreme are the Extremists? Pankisi Gorge as a Case Study." Foreign Policy Research Institute, July 21, 2015. <https://bit.ly/2rmU2gl>; Rayhan Demytrie. "Jihadist Shadow Hangs over Georgia's Pankisi Gorge." *BBC*, April 21, 2016. <https://bbc.in/1T11an7>.

<sup>205</sup> Alexander Eliseev, "Border Management Staff College," (PowerPoint Presentation, 25th Economic and Environmental Forum, First Preparatory Meeting, Tajikistan, January 23-24, 2017).

<sup>206</sup> Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. "OSCE Chairman Regrets End of the OSCE Mandate in Chechnya," January 3, 2003, <https://www.osce.org/cio/54958>.

For the last twenty years, Russia maintained that this issue was an internal one, but it is becoming increasingly clear that it is not. The International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights declared that Chechnya “is no ‘internal affair’ of Russia, but a threat to European security.”<sup>207</sup> Addressing the Pankisi Gorge may be the most productive way to mitigate the situation.

### **Final Thoughts**

One of the things that makes the field of conflict analysis in general and George Mason University’s School for Conflict Analysis and Resolution in particular unique is the emphasis that is placed on reflective practice. All aspects of conflict—the antebellum, the period of actual combat, and the post-war reconstruction—are delicate. It does not take much pressure of any aspect of an ongoing (or even passed) conflict to transform an entire equilibrium. The researcher must also be constantly aware of the assumptions that they walk into the situation with, especially careful to the question if are they reinforcing harmful constructs through their research. Lives, in our field, are quite literally at stake. It is because of that core ethical obligation that it is necessary to step away from this academic work as is and insert myself into the final analysis.

This experience has brought me to reflect on the summer of 2014. On August 9, Michael Brown was shot under dubious circumstances by police officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri. Outrage kicked off mass protests, and soon a grossly over-armed state police force overtook the city. Images of snipers and Armored Personnel Carriers (though not literal tanks are certainly invocative of them) flooded the news and my

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<sup>207</sup> Smith, *Mountains*, 225

various social media accounts. I dropped people I considered friends and found myself in several heated conversations with my mother—who is White.

This had come at a time when I was re-evaluating my politics, swinging from belligerent, conservative and right-wing affiliations to more liberal ones. I was also re-evaluating my identity as a mixed-race, Black woman from the United States. There was a compulsion, in my twenty-four-year-old heart, bitten by idealism, to pack my bags and travel to Missouri, and offer support to the people in whatever capacity I could. I had grown up hearing stories of the Civil Rights Movement from my father who grew up in Jim Crow Mississippi. At nine, I had taken it upon myself to memorize Dr. King’s “I Have a Dream” speech. Would I be able to look my children and my grandchildren in the eye, when I told them that when my Selma presented itself, I did nothing?

And God, did I want to just *leave* and get away from my parents for some time.

“To do the right thing.” Legacy. Personal circumstance. These were the reasons I wanted to go. Perhaps there are more—lesser motivations that have since been erased by time. What I blasted on Tumblr was different than what I told my parents and wholly different than what I told myself. Where any of those reasons more or less legitimate?

I never did fly out though. I was felt held back by obligations to my full-time job, my relationship and my family (despite our differences)—typical factors the literature on radicalization identifies as keeping people from joining and from acting in them. There was also a relentless voice in my head asking logistical questions like: where would I stay, and what exactly would I *do* there anyway?

I do not intend to draw connections between what happened in Ferguson to the Syrian Civil War, nor do I intend to moral equivalence between myself and Chechen foreign fighters. Rather, what this exercise has allowed me to do is reflect on the notion that motivations are singular and all-encompassing. Some change over time and change depending on who the audience is.

When we as scholars and observers and policymakers try to analyze the situation of foreign fighters—Chechen or otherwise—it is important to bear in mind how complex motivations are, how difficult it is to pinpoint them, and from then, how difficult it is to procure solutions to counter these impulses.

## **APPENDIX A: THE HISTORY OF THE RUSSO-CHECHEN CONFLICT**

### **Who are the Chechens?**

The Chechen Republic is a small autonomous republic, one of twenty-one within the larger Russian Federation, and home to just under one and a half million persons.<sup>1</sup> It sits along the Caucasus Mountains, separating it from the independent nations of the Southern Caucasus, Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia. There is no natural border between it, Dagestan and Ingushetia, Chechnya's neighbors to the east and west, respectively. The Terek River is the main body of water cuts across its northern valley, sourced in the Black Sea, creating "Minor Chechnya" in its basin and "Major Chechnya" along the mountainside. Those that live in the mountainside typically refer to themselves as "the real Chechens."<sup>2</sup>

Chechnya is mostly agrarian: 65% of its population lives along the countryside, and the rest are spread around its five urban centers, each with more than 20,000 persons: Shali, Urus-Martan, Gudermes, Argun and Grozny, its capital.<sup>3</sup> In his 2006 memoir of the Chechen Wars, German Sadulaev describes his home, Shali:

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<sup>1</sup> Rosstat, *Предварительная оценка численности населения Чеченской Республики на 1 января 2018 года* (Moscow, Russia: January 2018). [Russian].

<sup>2</sup> Valery Tishkov, *Chechnya: A War Torn Society* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004), 185.

<sup>3</sup> Rosstat, *Предварительная оценка*.

The land is built upon, filled with forest plantations or tilled for cereal crops. The cows pluck the grass at the roadside, along the lands of the state farm, and on the large field marked on the map of the village as a football pitch...Here on this outlying field, at the edge of the mulberry grove and the bank of the river Bass, we kids are the only ones to play football, but the cows don't bother us.<sup>4</sup>

One of Chechnya's most enduring features is its perceived remoteness by the locals and the Russians. It is about 11,000 miles from Moscow and just under 500 from the nearest Russian large city, Rostov-on-Don. To the Russians, the Caucasus are one part of what is known as the *blizhneye zarubezh'e* (ближнее зарубежье). During the Soviet era, this was translated into English many ways, including "the abroad close at hand," though the phrase that became used widely was the "near abroad."<sup>5</sup> As implied in its translation, the "near abroad"-ness of the Caucasus goes beyond physical proximity. The Caucasus is a place in between places, straddling the historic spheres of both the Russian (Christian Orthodox) and Ottoman (Islamic) Empires. It is one of the most ethnolinguistically diverse areas in the world. Within the context of high ethnic diversity (perhaps prompted by such cultural assortment), Chechen society evolved to be in equal parts, complex and rigid.

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<sup>4</sup> German Sadulaev, *I Am a Chechen!* (London: Vintage, 2010), 48.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Rywkin, "Russia and the Near Abroad under Putin," *American Foreign Policy Interests* no. 25 (2003): 2-12, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10803920390187216>; William Safire, "ON LANGUAGE; The Near Abroad," *The New York Times*, May 22, 1994, <https://nyti.ms/2F8i0AL>.

“It is hard to be Chechen,” is an oft-remarked saying by Chechens.<sup>6</sup> Each aspect of their lives is carefully proscribed by tradition in a code known as *adat*.<sup>7</sup> Sadulaev continues:

If you are Chechen, you must feed and shelter your enemy when he comes knocking as a guest; you must give up your life for a girl’s honour [sic] without a second thought; you must kill your blood foe by plunging a dagger into his chest, because you can never shoot anyone in the back; you must offer your last piece of bread to your friend; you must get out from your car to stand and greet an elderly man passing on foot; you must never run away, even if your enemy are a thousand strong and you have no chance of victory, you must take up the fight all the same. And you can never cry, no matter what happens.<sup>8</sup>

*Adat* details proper behavior, not only for an individual Chechen and their family, but between other families and the larger clans or *teips*. *Teips* are vital to understanding Chechen society, as “the blood kinship” is the foundation of the society and the “fortress of *adat*.”<sup>9</sup> The Chechen is known—protected or rejected—by their clan affiliation, which includes extended family members and an ancestral piece of land.<sup>10</sup> In ancient times, *teips* were much more formalized, reliant on actual blood relations. Today, the form of

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<sup>6</sup> Layton, *Chechens*, 9.

<sup>7</sup> John Russell, “The Roots of Violence in the Russo-Chechen Conflict: Identifying Galtung’s Conflict Triangle” in *Chechnya: Russia’s “War on Terror,”* (New York & London: Routledge), 18.

<sup>8</sup> Sadulaev, *Chechen*, 8.

<sup>9</sup> Emil Souleimanov, “Jihad or Security? Understanding the Jihadization of Chechen Insurgency through Recruitment into Jihadist Units” *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 17, no. 1 (2015): 90; Anatol Lieven, *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press), 340.

<sup>10</sup> Gall and De Wall, *Calamity*, 27.



*teips* have changed, relying less on blood, but their function as a means of affiliation and an object to affix loyalty to remains.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, some scholars have compared the hundreds of men loyal to President Ramzan Kadyrov, known as the *kadyrovtsy*, as a kind of modern *teip*.<sup>12</sup>

Chechnya's story is inextricably tied with Russia. After all, they have been under Russian rule since the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>13</sup> When the Russian's folded Chechnya into their Empire, the integration was far from complete: leaving a space simultaneously a part of, but nevertheless quite fundamentally removed from Russia. The physical and cultural othering has compelled both fascination and ire from its colonial holders. In the early days of the land's acquisition, young nobles were encouraged to travel to the mountains to "confront the Orient [within] themselves."<sup>14</sup> Mikhail Lermontov, one such gentlemen from Moscow, wrote extensive poetry of the Caucasus. *A Cossack Lullaby*, written in 1838, contains a line which eloquently describes the way Russians saw their new acquisition:

"The Terek runs over its rocky bed  
and splashes its dark wave.

A sly Chechen crawls along the bank,

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<sup>11</sup> Souleimanov, "Jihad or Security?," 90; Ekaterina Sokirianskaia, "Families and clans in Ingushetia and Chechnya. A Fieldwork Report," *Central Asian Survey* 24, no. 4 (2006): 466, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02634930500453590>.

<sup>12</sup> Souleimanov, "Jihad or Security?," 94; Joshua Yaffa, "Putin's Dragon," *The New Yorker*, April 8, 2016, <https://bit.ly/2K5VsUT>.

<sup>13</sup> Brian Glyn Williams, *Inferno in Chechnya: The Russian-Chechen Wars, the al-Qaeda Myth, and the Boston Marathon Bombers* (Lebanon: ForeEdge), 8.

<sup>14</sup> Daniel Treisman, *The Return: Russia's Journey from Gorbachev to Medvedev* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011), 263.

sharpens his *kinzhal*;  
But your father is an old warrior  
forged in battle;  
sleep, my darling, be calm,  
sing lullaby.”<sup>15</sup>

As Chechnya is tied to Russia, the tale of the modern-day Federation is equally shackled from its southern neighbor. Chechnya is one of the few places in the world that the Kremlin has been willing to spend so much in blood, treasure and international reputation (Moscow’s annexation of Crimea and its occupation of the Donbas in 2014 are, perhaps, close seconds). Katherine Layton notes in the introduction of her ethnography of Chechens that “[t]o Russia, Chechens are a nuisance, a danger and an embarrassment, and a need.”<sup>16</sup> Andrei Piontkovsky, a Russian poet, calls Chechnya “our collective neurosis.”<sup>17</sup> As a Chechen himself, Sadulaev echoes this sentiment: “We are Chechens, and we are Russia’s enemies.”<sup>18</sup>

Some Chechens are quick to point out that the Russo-Chechen conflict goes back “five hundred years.”<sup>19</sup> Some scholars, like Brian Glyn Williams, flag the nineteenth century as the beginning of this deeply entrenched animosity.<sup>20</sup> Others, like Daniel Treisman, say that the ancient quarrel between Chechnya and Russia is quite modern, alongside Chechnya’s wave of nationalism, and was “cooked up by local politicians from

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<sup>15</sup> Gall and De Waal, *Calamity*, 31.

<sup>16</sup> Layton, *Chechens*, 7.

<sup>17</sup> Russell, “Roots of Violence,” 10.

<sup>18</sup> Sadulaev, *Chechen*, 37.

<sup>19</sup> Layton, *Chechens*, 57.

<sup>20</sup> Williams, *Inferno*, 8.

convenient myths and misremembered history.”<sup>21</sup> Regardless of how long the conflict between the two entities has persisted, there are two key elements in the Chechen narrative regarding this conflict that deserve deeper understanding—the Caucasus Wars and the 1944 Great Deportation.

Narrative is the glue that holds Chechen society together. Chechen self-conception is “deeply rooted meanings, vivid recollections and acute historical memories that serve to bind Chechens together into an undeniable cultural collective.”<sup>22</sup> This notion is also reflected in the work of Vamik Volkan, who explores “chosen trauma” as a source of large-group identity.<sup>23</sup> The understanding of how these instances have deeply interwoven themselves into the construction of “Chechen” is important to keep in mind, as such events can be referenced in order to gin up support for certain movements.<sup>24</sup>

### **The Caucasus Wars (1817-1864)**

The Caucasus Wars were not the first time that the cultures had clashed; there had been small-scaled encounters along the borderlands for decades before the official incursion.<sup>25</sup> However, 1817 marked the first time they quarreled at such a degree, and the moment was one of identity cohesion for the Chechens. “Every Chechen knows that they are Chechen,” Layton writes, but according to Sadulaev, it is to Russia they owe this knowledge, for they “impressed on each Aryan, Hurrian, Khazar: You are a Chechen.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Treisman, *The Return*, 286.

<sup>22</sup> Layton, *Chechens*, 29.

<sup>23</sup> Vamik Volkan, “Transgenerational Transmission and Chosen Traumas: An Aspect of Large-Group Identity,” *Group Analysis*, 37, no. 1 (March 1 2001): 79-97.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 95.

<sup>25</sup> Williams, *Inferno*, 8-9.

<sup>26</sup> Layton, *Chechens*, 30; Sadulaev, *Chechen*, 37.

Ironically, this led to the branding of anti-Russian sentiment on the Chechen consciousness. Identifying as *Chechen* went beyond clan affiliation and attending a mosque.<sup>27</sup> These wars fold in an imperative to stand against the Russians and provide stories that heroes' parents could point to in teaching their children how to do so.<sup>28</sup> The second, it was the first time that *gazavat* had been invoked to fight the Russians.

Chechnya is a highland culture, and thus, has most of the trappings one might associate with such a construct. Williams makes connections with the Scottish, the Appalachians and the dwellers of the Hindu Kush in Afghanistan.<sup>29</sup> These are cultures that tend to forge ideals such as honor, freedom, blood feuds, a warrior's ethos, into identity as silver is forged into glass to make its surface reflective.<sup>30</sup> Naturally, there would be a tenet for justified and holy warfare—*gazavat*. Islamic holy war “animated...key elements of the Chechen cultural text,” writes Hank Johnston.<sup>31</sup> This blending of theological tenets with *adat* practice and ancient pagan iconography, is one of the defining features of Chechen culture.<sup>32</sup> Under the banner of *gazavat*, the “ragbag of tribes” united under an ethnic Avar from Dagestan and known to history only as Imam Shamil.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Galina Yemelianova, “Islam, Nationalism and the State in the Muslim Caucasus,” *Caucasus Survey* 1 no. 2, (2014): 4, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23761199.2014.11417291>.

<sup>28</sup> Yemelianova, “Islam, Nationalism and the State,” 4.

<sup>29</sup> Williams, *Inferno*, 9.

<sup>30</sup> Judith Matloff, *The War is in the Mountains: Violence in the World's High Places* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2017).

<sup>31</sup> Hank Johnston, “Ritual, strategy, and deep culture in the Chechen national movement,” *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 1 no. 3 (2008): 327.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

Imam Shamil went one step beyond merely invoking religious duty to defense, and compelling the “warriors” of the mountains to fight the Russians. He attempted to build a Caucasus-wide Islamic state, an *imamate*, with himself as its head. In 1840, he forged a theocratic state, with its rule of law based firmly in *sharia*, and attempted to usher in a religious revival, tempering older and secular norms of Chechen Islam and encouraging a more “correct” form of Islam.<sup>34</sup> The term “attempted” is not used casually. Despite maintaining high regard and deep respect from the Chechens, and a military prowess to support his fiery words, Shamil’s desires to drive the imperialists from the Caucasus and to build an Islamic state founded on Orthodox principles, ultimately failed after 20 years.<sup>35</sup> Not only because they were eventually defeated by the Russians, but the idea of reigning in the “French of the Caucasus” was a fool’s errand as “most of them went on smoking, playing music and dancing as before.”<sup>36</sup>

However, he was successful in laying the foundations for a narrative, an ideal that would be pointed to and built upon for generations to come. Indeed, a line can be drawn from these twenty years in the nineteenth century to the twenty-first. The name of Chechnya’s sole remaining jihadist terror organization is the Caucasus Emirate, and its most feared general’s name, Shamil Basayev (1965-2006).<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 328.

<sup>35</sup> Williams, *Inferno*, 22-26.

<sup>36</sup> Gall and De Waal, *Calamity*, 33.

<sup>37</sup> Layton, *Chechens*, 53.

### **The Deportation of 1944**

One of the stories that is shared from one generation to the next is that “Russians are aggressors who have no goodwill...and cannot be trusted.”<sup>38</sup> This was all but cemented in the Chechen consciousness with the Deportation of 1944. During a fact-finding mission conducted in 1992 by International Alert, it was reported:

Any conversation of more than 15 minutes with a Chechen touches on the humiliation they suffered at the hands of successive Russian governments, starting with the period of Tsarist expansion...continuing through the deportation to Central Asia in February 1944, and culminating in failure of the Soviet state to return property to them when they were allowed to return in the late 1950s, or compensation for losses and sufferings during their Central Asian exile.<sup>39</sup>

Another laments, “Can one really tell it all? I have such a weight on my heart that it is difficult to remember it all. Tell me why did they allow such horrors to happen?”<sup>40</sup>

In a scene that would have been familiar in Warsaw or Krakow in the 1930s, nearly 400,000 Chechen (and Ingush, who had not been separated yet) men, women and children were forced from their home and herded into cattle cars by Russian Soviet soldiers. For those who did not perish on the journey, they were to make do in the Tajik Soviet Republic, the Yakut Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR), or, where

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 37.

<sup>39</sup> John Russell, “A Tragic History” in *Chechnya: Russia’s “War on Terror,”* (New York & London: Routledge), 36.

<sup>40</sup> Williams, *Inferno*, 66.

most of them were taken, Almaty, the capital of the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic.<sup>41</sup> Though the Secretary General of the Soviet Union, Joseph Stalin, was born Georgian (his family name was Dzhugashvili), he shared with his fellow ethnic Russians a mistrust of the Chechens. When it was revealed to him that there was a potential for collusion between them and the Nazis, he ordered their removal.<sup>42</sup> The entire ordeal only lasted a few days. To empty the streets of Grozny, Gudermes, and everything in between, it required 80,000 individuals to be hauled off each day.<sup>43</sup>

It should be noted, however, that the Nazis never reached the borders of Chechnya, and instead, only made it to Mazdok, in North Ossetia.<sup>44</sup> Maribek Vatchagaev also points out that the Chechen war heroes and victims were purposefully suppressed by the Soviets, and left to be forgotten by history.<sup>45</sup> This highly traumatic and shared experience would later become known as The Deportation.

Their exile lasted over a decade. Not only was the terrain and climate of the steppes wildly different to what the Chechens were accustomed to in the mountains, the displaced drew the ire and consternation of their neighbors. While the Soviets had a hand in manufacturing their disregard, it is of some wonder how much prodding was needed for the Kazakhs to look down upon and torment the “traitors of the Soviet state.”<sup>46</sup> They were forbidden to work, and through harsh policies which punished petty larceny with

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 63.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 50.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 58.

<sup>44</sup> Mairbek Vatchagaev, “Remembering the 1944 Deportation: Chechnya’s Holocaust,” *North Caucasus Weekly*, The Jamestown Foundation. <http://bit.ly/2p6m6Ev>.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Williams, *Inferno*, 66.

labor camp imprisonment, were forcibly starved.<sup>47</sup> By 1949, approximately one-quarter of the 400,000 succumbed to their fate.<sup>48</sup>

Official Soviet documents claim that, in total, one third of Chechnya's entire population was killed in the process and state of deportation.<sup>49</sup> Independent sources assert the number is half.<sup>50</sup> The Soviet state encouraged Russians to move into the recently abandoned homes, changing street names and towns, and bulldozing cemeteries.<sup>51</sup> However, in 1957, the deported Chechens marched back to the Caucasus and to their homes, and in 2004, the European Parliament officially declared what had transpired to be a genocide.<sup>52</sup>

Chechnya and Russia have a long and contested history together. As an imperial subject, the subjugation of Chechnya is infused within Russian society, systematically built into Moscow's policies towards it. Subsequently, the role of victim and the casting of Russia as unreliable and naturally vicious, has been weaved into Chechen identity. This is reflected quite clearly in the above events. The Caucasus Wars and the Deportation of 1944 lead to a compelling question regarding the length of these hostilities: if Chechnya has always been embroiled in a hot war with its oppressors, or if their current tensions were yet another unintended consequence of the fall of the Soviet Union. While Daniel Treisman offers a provocative argument for the latter, and it seems methodologically unsound to draw a direct line from the context of the 19th century to

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<sup>47</sup> Layton, *Chechens*, 37.

<sup>48</sup> Williams, *Inferno*, 67.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Vatchagaev, "Remembering."

<sup>51</sup> Layton, *Chechens*, 37.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.; Vatchagaev, "Remembering."



the 21st, it is quite clear from the words of the Chechens themselves that these events have had a resonate impact on their national consciousness.

## **APPENDIX B: A CLASH OF PERSONALITIES AND EXTREMES: THE FIRST AND SECOND CHECHEN WARS**

### **The First War (1994-1996)**

Although only one-in-four monitors considered the election in 1991 as free and fair, there was some level of expectation that President Dzhokhar Dudayev would rule with democratic impulses and secular law. Indeed, Emma Gilligan purports that there was strong evidence, despite his autocratic inclinations, that “Dudayev’s ultimate aim was a constitutional secular state.”<sup>1</sup> However, by 1994, Grozny would resemble less of a functioning center of government and more of a “post-industrial wasteland.”<sup>2</sup> “The government was spending no money on public services and people working in schools or hospitals had not been paid in months, write Gall and De Waal.<sup>3</sup> Bands of armed men, loyal only to the president, roamed the streets.<sup>4</sup> Upon his visit to the region, Russian Vice President Aleksandr Rutskoi stated that he saw a “gang terrorizing the population”; not democracy, but “banditry.”<sup>5</sup> A story often told among Chechens is that during a local television interview, President Dudayev was asked about the pension payments in arrears.

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<sup>1</sup> Emma Gilligan, *Terror in Chechnya: Russia and the Tragedy of Civilians in War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 25.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Treisman, *The Return: Russia’s Journey from Gorbachev to Medvedev* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011), 270.

<sup>3</sup> Carlotta Gall and Thomas de Waal, *Chechnya: Calamity in the Caucasus* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 103.

<sup>4</sup> Treisman, *The Return*, 269.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid; Gall and De Waal, *Calamity*, 143.

His response—to flip off the camera and say, “This is what they can do with their pensions!”<sup>6</sup>

This, of course, could not have happened at a less opportune time for the newly minted Russian Federation, as they were crippled by their own internal strife and an experiment in radical free enterprise gone wrong. If the reforms of *perestroika* and *glasnost* were disruptive, then the rule of the Russian Federation’s first president, Boris Yeltsin, was catastrophic. Such chaos, combined with the genuine regard for independence that was felt among the Yeltsin staff, brought the Russian government to pause. Perhaps, it was believed, time would be enough of a catalyst for change.<sup>7</sup> Certainly, there was enough evidence that the Dudayev regime—and it most certainly was a *regime* by 1994—would collapse on its own. Yegor Gaidar, a top aide to President Yeltsin and liberal in his political persuasions, pointed out that in addition to oil deliveries being cut off, “Dudayev regime had sunk to its lowest level of popularity and was beginning to collapse before our eyes, people were running...[he] no longer controlled the situation.”<sup>8</sup> But all time did was allow the situation to fester.

Until December 1994, the situation in Chechnya was believed to be at a smolder, a concern, but at the very least, off the track to war. President Dudayev even stated, as late as the war’s eve, “Of course there won’t be a war, for what reason would there be a war?”<sup>9</sup> And not every Chechen saw independence—let alone war—as something they

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<sup>6</sup> Katherine Layton, *Chechens: Culture and Society* (New York: Palgrave Macmillian, 2014), 43.

<sup>7</sup> Gall and De Waal, *Calamity*, 143.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Gall and De Waal, *Calamity*, 170.

ought to have.<sup>10</sup> There were attempts during the highest levels of tension to bring Presidents Yeltsin and Dudayev together, but those fell through, on the one hand due to Yeltsin's increasing recalcitrance and Dudayev's erratic behavior, which made the situation "utterly confusing [for] Moscow policymakers."<sup>11</sup>

In their book, *Chechnya: Calamity in the Caucasus*, Carlotta Gall and Thomas De Waal describe scenes of an absolute breakdown in communication and process from the Kremlin in the lead-up to the First Chechen War. Within that cloud of discord, they discuss the ever shifting lines of alliances and influence among Yeltsin's cabinet, from war hawks like Grachev, the Defense Minister and Sergei Stepashin, the head of the FSB, to liberals like Gaidar and Georgy Satarov, another top aide. What Gall and De Waal want to express to their audience through these thriller-esque moments in Kremlinology, is that the key to understanding the start of the First War lies "not in oil or a radical change in the situation on the ground, but in a shift in the balance of Kremlin politics, combined with poor intelligence from Chechnya."<sup>12</sup> Pain and Popov, who were top advisors in the Yeltsin administration, also had this to say: "It would be much closer to the truth, and much more productive, to understand Russian decision-making in the more prosaic terms of chaos theory."<sup>13</sup>

As the days progressed and tensions only seemed to rise, Yeltsin began to favor the advice of his staff's hawks. It was quickly seen that intervention in a failing

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<sup>10</sup> Robert Schaefer, *The Insurgency in Chechnya and the North Caucasus: From Gazavat to Jihad* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2011), 125.

<sup>11</sup> Gall and De Waal, *Calamity*, 169.

<sup>12</sup> Gall and De Waal, *Calamity*, 165.

<sup>13</sup> Anatol Lieven, *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press), 94.

Chechnya, a “small, victorious war,” would not only solve the issue of instability in a region that was still *technically* a part of the Federation, but would provide something for the Russian people to unite behind.<sup>14</sup> The experiments of rapid, massive, radical privatization and capitalism alongside democracy were failing, leaving social and economic chaos in their wake. While building a cohesive ideology to replace communism was not high on any policy maker’s list, surely there was no better way to unite the people than through a war.

### **Why was the Second Chechen War (1999-2009) so destructive?**

The Second Chechen War was long, bloody and gruesome. Large swathes of human rights violations were conducted on both sides.<sup>15</sup> The scale of that violence should be taken into account, however. Basayev sought headline-grabbing acts against civilians—not just in Chechnya, but in Russia proper—like the Moscow metro bombings, Tushino concert bombings, Vnukovo airline bombings, the Dubrovka theater and Beslan school attacks.<sup>16</sup> These were devastating attacks; the Dubrovka siege led to the deaths of 150 people and over 300 (mostly children) at Beslan.<sup>17</sup>

However, with the might of an official and tax-backed military, the Russian military could extoll such damage three-fold. Of particular note of such tactics and acts was the use of fuel-air explosives (known by the Russians as “vacuum bombs”) and

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<sup>14</sup> Gall and De Waal, *Calamity*, 165.

<sup>15</sup> John Russell, “The Roots of Violence in the Russo-Chechen Conflict: Identifying Galtung’s Conflict Triangle” in *Chechnya: Russia’s “War on Terror,”* (New York & London: Routledge), 14-15.

<sup>16</sup> James Hughes, *Chechnya: From Nationalism to Jihad* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 105.

<sup>17</sup> Artem Krechetnikov, “Moscow theatre siege: Questions remain unanswered,” *BBC*, October 24, 2012, <https://bbc.in/1swC4GG>; Shaun Walker, “Putin’s legacy is a massacre, say the mothers of Beslan,” *The Independent*, February 26, 2008, <https://ind.pn/2ICG2Go>.

indiscriminate raids on villages known as *zachistkas* (cleansings). Williams writes, “In one typical operation in a Grozny neighborhood, fifty-six civilians were captured and then systematically executed in cold blood by rampaging Russian troops.”<sup>18</sup> The *zachistkas* were so devastating that the Council of Europe was forced to intervene in 2003, forcing Russia to stop them; however, disappearances continued to occur.<sup>19</sup> A Chechen living in Grozny at the time of the war had this to say, “I never imagined that war could be worse than what we saw before. But this is not war. It is murder on a state level; it is mass murder.”<sup>20</sup>

*Médecins sans Frontières* (Doctors without Borders) composed a report about the carnage of this war. A woman interviewed for it said, “If [this] keeps going on, all the people will either be exterminated, or they will rise up.”<sup>21</sup> The report itself read:

The war has entered a new phase...The Russian forces have transformed Chechnya into a vast ghetto. In this ghetto, terror reigns, every civilian is a suspect, and freedom of movement is denied. Each and every checkpoint is a “Russian roulette” which puts their lives at stake. It is known as *bespredel*, a Russian slang term that means excessive abuse of power, and, in Chechnya especially, “unlimited violence.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Brian Glyn Williams, *Inferno in Chechnya: The Russian-Chechen Wars, the al-Qaeda Myth, and the Boston Marathon Bombers* (Lebanon: ForeEdge), 177.

<sup>19</sup> Williams, *Inferno*, 178.

<sup>20</sup> Andrew Meier, *Black Earth: A Journey through Russia after the Fall*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003), 97.

<sup>21</sup> Scott Peterson, “Heavy Civilian Toll in Chechnya’s ‘Unlimited Violence,’” *Christian Science Monitor*, December 11, 2000, <https://bit.ly/2ICFSi4>.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

In the end, between 50 and 80,000 military and civilian lives were lost. Hundreds of thousands of survivors were left displaced.<sup>23</sup>

But why?

“Why” is always a difficult question for the academic to probe. Such is this mountain to climb in any manner that satisfies the constructs of scientific inquiry that questions of “what” and “how” are more suitable to ask. There are a few clues, however, that lend answers to why this situation escalated to the degree that it did by looking at the players.

For the Russian military and government (recalling that under Putin, the ranks of officials had been filled with *siloviki* figures) it seems to have been a matter of pride and prestige. “Unfinished business,” as stated above. James Hughes describes that a new war in the region might “help restore morale, but also replenish military power, which had been significantly depleted by the [First] war, and further run down by budget cuts in its aftermath.”<sup>24</sup> To them, it was personal.

In October 1999, mere months before the second war began, still Prime Minister, Vladimir Putin said, “Wherever one looks, one sees Chechnya.”<sup>25</sup> It had become a “floating metaphor for everything that had gone wrong in Russia’s troubled rebirth,” Daniel Treisman notes, “a story with many imaginary beginnings and no ending.”<sup>26</sup> But he would use Chechnya as a kind of “anvil...[to hammer] out a public position as an

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<sup>23</sup> Williams, *Inferno*, 154.

<sup>24</sup> Hughes, *Nationalism*, 108.

<sup>25</sup> Treisman, *The Return*, 263.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

ideology for a new kind of Russian nationalism.”<sup>27</sup> For Putin, action in Chechnya was personal. So personal was Putin’s fixation on Chechnya that a satirist joked that he kept a letter knife carved out of Shamil Basayev’s shinbone on his desk.<sup>28</sup>

Emma Gilligan writes that the conflict transformed the Chechen fighters to “blood avengers,” and continues: “The retaliation of Chechen separatists was a cumulative process that grew in response to acts of aggression by the Russian armed forces.”<sup>29</sup> In 2002, Andrew Meier, an American journalist, travelled from Russia into Chechnya by train. One of his companions, a man whom Meyer refers to as Nabokov, spoke rather glibly, but aptly, about the conflict and violence, which at that point had entered its third year. “Chechens don’t like to be screwed,” Nabokov said, “this isn’t about independence anymore. This is about revenge, honor, and this is forever.”<sup>30</sup> It was personal.

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<sup>27</sup> Hughes, *Nationalism*, 110.

<sup>28</sup> Treisman, *The Return*, 110.

<sup>29</sup> Gilligan, *Terror in Chechnya*, 125.

<sup>30</sup> Andrew Meier, *Chechnya: To the Heart of a Conflict*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company), 16.



**APPENDIX C:  
“CHECHENS IN SYRIA” CODEBOOK**

**Metadata Variables**

These variables describe identifiable details from the articles gathered on “Chechens in Syria.”

1. *Field Name:* **URL**  
*Variable Type:* Text  
*Description:* Enter the article’s URL.
2. *Field Name:* **Tag**  
*Variable Type:* Categorical  
*Description:* There are five tags that this study will investigate: “islamic state,” “is,” “isis,” “the islamic state of iraq and ash sham” and “игиш.” Select which tag the article has used.
  - 1= islamic state
  - 2= isis
  - 3= is
  - 4= islamic state of iraq and ash sham
  - 5= игиш
3. *Field Name:* **Page**  
*Variable Type:* Text  
*Description:* How many pages are attributed to the above tags? Which page is this article listed on? Record this as [page number]/[number of pages].
4. *Field Name:* **Title**  
*Variable Type:* Text  
*Description:* Enter the article’s title.
5. *Field Name:* **Date**  
*Variable Type:* Date  
*Description:* Enter the date of the article’s publication in the form MM/DD/YYYY.

## **Personal Metadata Variables**

These variables denote information regarding the individual's identifiable information.

1. *Field Name:* **Last\_Name**

*Variable Type:* Text

*Description:* Enter the legal last name of the individual who declares a motivation in the article. If the legal last name is not known or not mentioned in the article, denote (-99). If the article is not discussing a singular person, but instead, is speaking for the entire group, record (-88).

2. *Field Name:* **First\_Name**

*Variable Type:* Text

*Description:* Enter the legal first name of the individual who declares a motivation in the article. If the legal first name is not known or not mentioned in the article, denote (-99). If the article is not discussing a singular person, but instead, is speaking for the entire group, record (-88).

3. *Field Name:* **Patronymic**

*Variable Type:* Text

*Description:* Individuals in the former Soviet space tend to follow the Russian naming convention of having a Patronymic rather than a middle name. Enter the legal patronymic of the individual who declares a motivation in the article. If the individual *does not* have a patronymic, but instead a middle name, write that in this column as well. If neither patronymic nor middle name is not known or not mentioned in the article, denote (-99). If the article is not discussing a singular person, but instead, is speaking for the entire group, record (-88).

4. *Field Name:* **Kunya**

*Variable Type:* Text

*Description:* It is typical for jihadist-inspired foreign fighters to give themselves a war name. It is usually an Arabic name from the Quran or Islamic folklore and often marks where the individual is from (e.x., Omar al-Shishani - Omar the Chechen). If a *kunya* is not listed or known, write (-99). If the article is not discussing a singular person, but instead, is speaking for the entire group, record (-88).

5. *Field Name:* **Alias**

*Variable Type:* Text

*Description:* Sometimes foreign fighters have additional aliases in addition to their war name, and at times they are better known by their online persona. Write the individual's other alias or screen name here. Additionally, if the article notes differences in spelling of the individual's legal name or *kunya* (e.x., Mokhamed vs. Mukhamed), take note of that here. If an additional alias is not listed or

unknown, write (-99). If there is sufficient evidence to suggest the individual does *not* have additional aliases or if the article is not discussing a singular person, but instead, an entire group, record (-88).

6. *Field Name:* **Birthdate**

*Variable Type:* Date

*Description:* If the birthdate of the individual is known, record it as MM/DD/YYYY. If only the year is mentioned, estimate the date of birth as January 1 (e.x. the article says the individual is born in 1979, write 01/01/1979). If the article mentions the person was born “early,” “in the middle”/“mid,” or “late” in a particular year, mark January 1, June 1, or October 1 respectively. If the article does not mention a birthdate or year, mark (-99). If the article is not discussing a singular person, but instead, an entire group, record (-88).

7. *Field Name:* **Age**

*Variable Type:* Number

*Description:* Note the individual's age here. If no age is given, but a birth year is, subtract the article's publication date from the birth year. If the age is not mentioned or unknown, mark (-99). If the article is not discussing a singular person, but instead, an entire group, record (-88).

### **Ethnic Identity Variables**

These variables consider the question of where the individual is from and what ethnicity the article at hand identifies them as.

NOTE: Individuals identified as Chechen or Kist in addition to having lived in Chechnya or the Pankisi Gorge are to be included in the analysis. Those whose ethnicities are unknown are also included.

1. *Field Name:* **Hometown**

*Variable Type:* Text

*Description:* If the article mentions the name of the town, city or village the individual is from, write it here. If the hometown is not mentioned or unknown, mark (-99). If the article is not discussing a singular person, but instead, an entire group, record (-88).

2. *Field Name:* **District**

*Variable Type:* Text

*Description:* If the article mentions the name of the district the individual is from, write it here. The “district” here is a broad term meant to capture the administrative region— bigger than the city, but not as big as the state itself (e.x., the Pankisi Gorge). If the district is not mentioned or unknown, mark (-99). If the

article is not discussing a singular person, but instead, an entire group, record (-88).

3. *Field Name:* **Republic**

*Variable Type:* Text

*Description:* If the article mentions the name of the republic or state the individual is from, write it here. If the republic or state is not mentioned or unknown, mark (-99). If the article is not discussing a singular person, but instead, an entire group, record (-88).

4. *Field Name:* **Ethnicity**

*Variable Type:* Categorical

*Description:* What is the individual's ethnicity? If the ethnicity is not mentioned or unknown, mark (-99). If the article is not discussing a singular person, but instead, an entire group, record (-88).

1= Chechen

2= Chechen - Kist

3= Avar

4= Kadar

5= Dargin

6= Kamyk

7= Lezgin

8= Lak

9= Ingush

10= North Ossetian

11= South Ossetian

12= Kabardian

13= Balkar

14= Karachay

15= Cherkess

16= Nogai

17= Abazin

18= Adyghe

19= Russian

20= Cossack

21= Tabasaran

22= Azeri

23= Armenian

24= Georgian (not Kist)

-99= Unknown

-88= Not Applicable (the article is about the group)

## Motivation

These entries seek to capture the reasons for an individual's decision to leave Chechnya for the battlefields in Syria and Iraq under the banner of the Islamic State.

1. *Field Name:* **Dep\_Date**

*Variable Type:* Date

*Description:* When did the individual leave the North Caucasus for the Islamic State? If only the year is mentioned, estimate the departure date as January 1 (e.x. the article says the individual left in 2013, write 01/01/2013). If the article mentions the person was left "early," "in the middle"/"mid", or "late" in a particular year, mark January 1, June 1, or October 1 respectively. If the article does not mention a date of departure mark (-99). If the article is not discussing a singular person, but instead, an entire group, record (-88).

2. *Field Name:* **Speaker**

*Variable Type:* Categorical, Multiple Entry

*Description:* Who provided the motivation? Was this a direct quote from the individual? Something that a friend or close relative mentioned, speaking for the individual? Was this simply reported? Sometimes, the article will have multiple motivations mentioned. Separate the motivations with a semicolon (e.x., 0;1 for a direct quote and further reporting).

0= Reported

1= Direct Quote

2= Reported

-99= Unknown

-88= Not stated

3. *Field Name:* **Pro\_Anti**

*Variable Type:* Categorical, Multiple Entry

*Description:* Does the individual mention that they are *going* to the Islamic State (Pro) or *not going* to the Caucasus Emirate (Anti)? Or, is there another motivation mentioned? Sometimes, the article will have multiple motivations mentioned. Separate the motivations with a semicolon (e.x., 0;1 for statements pro-Islamic State and anti-Caucasus Emirate).

0= Implicit (against the Caucasus Emirate)

1= Explicit (for the Islamic State)

2= Other

-99= Unknown

-88= Not stated

4. *Field Name:* **Group\_Ind**

*Variable Type:* Ordinal

*Description:* Is the individual strictly speaking for themselves or their group? Do they use the term "I" or "we?" Or is this article reporting on the group (uses "they" or "them"?)

- 0= Individual is speaking on behalf of the group (uses “we” or “the group and I”)
- 1= Article is reporting on the group (uses “they” or “Them”)
- 2= Individual is speaking on behalf of themselves (uses only “I”)
- 99= Unknown
- 88= Not Applicable

5. *Field Name:* **Quote**

*Variable Type:* Text

*Description:* Record the direct quote from the article that informed the answers to questions 2-4.

### **Grounded Theory**

1. *Field Name:* **Themes\_1\_It**

*Variable Type:* Text

*Description:* What seems to be the core idea of the quote? Try to summarize the quote in a few words. If there are more than one motivation recorded, separate them with a semicolon.

2. *Field Name:* **Questions**

*Variable Type:* Text

*Description:* What further questions are you left with that might help build categories to fit the themes in?

3. *Field Name:* **Coded\_Themes\_2\_It**

*Variable Type:* Categorical

*Description:* Looking at the text in **Themes\_1\_It**, what are the most unique themes? The categories provided below are based on what the researcher discovered.

1. 1= IS is righteous
2. 2= IS is internationalist
3. 3= IS is strong
4. 4= CE is weak
5. 5= CE is nationalist
6. 6= Personal disagreements with the CE (not specific to tactics or ideology)
7. 7= CE infighting
8. 8= Other groups (including CE) are *not* righteous
9. 9= CE is not the true jihad
10. 10= Jihad in Syria is more prestigious
11. 11= “Sham” is a holy land
12. 12= The North Caucasus are a backwater
13. 13= There are no opportunities to wage jihad in the North Caucasus
14. 14= To wage jihad
15. 15= To establish sharia

- 16. 16= To establish the caliphate
- 17. 17= Personal connections
- 18. 18= Personal inclinations
- 19. 19= Liberation - anti Assad
- 20. 20= Humanitarian support
- 21. 21= Speculation

4. *Field Name:* **Grouped\_Themes\_3\_It**

*Variable Type:* Categorical

*Description:* What are the commonalities of the themes found in

**Coded\_Themes\_2\_It**? Although the question of pro-IS and anti-CE has already been posed and answered, there are other broad categorizations that these motivations can fall under.

- 1. 1= Pro-IS
- 2. 2= Anti-CE
- 3. 3= Pro-Syria
- 4. 4= Anti-NC
- 5. 5= Generic jihadist rhetoric
- 6. 6= Anti-Assad
- 7. 7= Personal
- 8. 8= Speculation

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