The Caucasus Emirate: Between Reality and Virtuality

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Abstract

This paper discusses the recent (2007) declaration of the Caucasus Emirate by Islamist guerilla fighters waging jihad against Russia in several republics of the Northern Caucasus (Russian Federation). It analyzes the practical reasons and ideological agendas behind the creation of this new polity that remains largely virtual with the website kavkazcenter.com as its primary mouthpiece and recruiting tool. The Emirate’s creation by the Caucasus mujahideen marks an important turning point in the evolution of anti-Russian resistance in the region from a group of secessionist movements under nationalist banners to a trans-ethnic Islamist one whose goal is to establish a supranational Islamic state in the region. The paper examines the fateful conflict between the secular-minded Chechen nationalists, whose primary goal is to wrest independence from Russia by means of putting pressure on her via European and international organizations, and the Islamists who see Sharia(t) and jihad as the sole viable means of liberating the entire Northern Caucasus from “infidel” Russian rule. It also addresses the self-representation and propaganda strategies employed by the mujahideen, especially their aggressive use of the Internet to assert their presence in the cyberspace at a time where their physical presence on the ground has become scarce in the face of the overwhelming military and logistical superiority of Russian Federal forces and local militias loyal to the Kremlin.

Author’s Bio

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One does not often hear of a state whose formation is announced on the Internet. Even more rarely, this state exists almost exclusively in the cyberspace. This paper will discuss one such virtual state—the “Caucasus Emirate” that was established by a group of mujahideen of the Northern Caucasus on October 31, 2007. Its founders, who had waged a guerilla war against the Russian Federal state for fifteen years now, declared that the Emirate had superseded the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria that, over the past ten years, has arguably been almost as virtual as its successor. The abolition of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria and the creation of the Caucasus-wide Islamic state (“emirate”)\(^1\) were announced by Dokka Umarov. Trained as a construction engineer at the Petroleum Institute in Grozny under Soviet rule, he joined the Chechen struggle for independence from Russia in 1994. In his own words, he was moved by patriotic sentiment and indignation against the winter 1994 Russian invasion of his native land on the orders of President Yeltsin.\(^2\) Umarov served as head of the Chechen Security Council under late President Maskhadov and, following the reoccupation of Chechnya by Russian Federal forces in the fall of 1999, was appointed commander of the Southwestern Front of Chechen resistance. After the successive deaths at the hands of Russian special forces of two presidents of the unrecognized Chechen Republic of Ichkeria in 2005 and 2006, vice-president Dokka Umarov was proclaimed its fifth president in June 2006. He held this office for a little more than a year only to announce the abolition of his state and office and the establishment of the Caucasus Emirate with himself as “Emir (Commander-in-Chief) of all Caucasus mujahideen.” In his new capacity, he presented himself to be the only legitimate leader of the Caucasus jihad.\(^3\)

\(^{1}\) Namely, a state ruled by a military commander or civilian ruler (Arab. \textit{amir} or \textit{emir}); in what follows both spellings of this Arabic word will be used.

\(^{2}\) RFE/RL Interviews Chechen Field Commander Umarov (by Andrei Babitsky); \texttt{http://www.rferl.org/articleprintview/1060266.html}.

In fact, according to the Declaration of the Caucasus Emirate, his jurisdiction now extends beyond the confines of the Caucasus proper to encompass all Muslims oppressed and occupied by “Rusnya” (a derogatory term for Russia used by the Caucasus mujahideen). This apparently implies the Muslim population of the Volga region, Siberia, and, in essence, any Muslim living under infidel Russian rule.

Think, says Umarov, addressing his followers in a virtual communiqué, to what extent we have angered Allah, if He sent down upon us these people, the most despicable and the lowest even among kuffar⁴ (unbelievers). Our glorious forefathers waged Jihad against these enemies, and today Allah is testing our generation, as He tested our fathers. Everything repeats [itself]. Jihad exposes faith and infidelity. Today, as in former times, people [are] divided into Mujahideen, hypocrites and apostates.⁵ I am not talking about native kuffar,⁶ they are exposed [that is, blatant—A.K.] falsehood and filth with a human appearance. They are dogs, dogs of Hell, whom Allah sends down upon Muslims when Muslims move away from their Religion.⁷

After stating who his enemies are, Umarov proceeds to outline the positive agenda of his Emirate:

We, the Mujahideen, went out to fight against the infidels not for the sake of fighting, but to restore the Sharia(t) of Allah in our land…It means I, the Amir of

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⁴ The plural of the Arabic kafir (“unbeliever”; “infidel”); the Emirate’s spokesmen use the plurals kafirs and kuffar interchangeably.
⁵ He uses the Arabic terms munafiqs and murtad(d)šs.
⁶ Namely, the Russians.
⁷ Ibid.
[the] Mujahideen, reject everything associated with Taghut (idolatry). I reject all kafir laws established in the world. I reject all laws and systems established by infidels in the lands of the Caucasus. I reject and declare outlawed all names used by infidels to divide Muslims. I declare outlawed ethnic, territorial, and colonial zones carrying names of “North Caucasian republics,” Trans-Caucasian republics” and such like.

To replace these “infidel” geographical denominations the Emir introduces a new administrative unit, vilayet, which he apparently borrowed from the administrative division of the Ottoman Empire before its dissolution in 1924. Umarov divides the lands of the Caucasus Emirate into six vilayets that more or less correspond to the current division of the Northern Caucasus into the republics of Daghestan, Chechnya, Ingushetia, Karachaevo-Cherkessia, Kabardino-Balkaria, North Ossetia-Alania, and Adygeia as well as the territories of the predominantly Slavic regions of the Krasnodarskii Krai and Stavropol’skii Krai. At the same time, Umarov is reluctant to clearly define the borders of his nascent state, because, in his words,

Firstly, [the] Caucasus is occupied by kuffar and apostates and is Dar al-Harb, the territory of war, and our nearest [that is, immediate—A.K.] task is to make [the] Caucasus Dar as-Salam, establishing the Sharia(t) and expelling the kuffar. Secondly, after expelling the kuffar we must reconquer all historical lands of Muslims, and these borders are beyond the boundaries of the Caucasus.8

Thus, Umarov’s ultimate goal is to create an Islamic state that transcends the borders of any one geographical locale within the Russian Federation and extends into an infinite spatial

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8 Ibid.
expanse that has been lost to Islam and is to be returned to the Muslims at some indefinite point in the future. This, no doubt, is an ambitious program that some skeptics are likely to dismiss as a sheer fantasy. Countering the objections of such skeptical individuals, whom he dubs “educated and uneducated hypocrites,” Umarov insists that he is not establishing “an abstract, virtual state,” but rather one that “is more real than all artificial colonial zones existing today.” The “reality” of the Caucasus Emirate, according to Umarov, is to be assured by a methodical and relentless prosecution of jihad against the “infidel” Russian state with a view to installing the Sharia(t) as the sole law of the land. Umarov’s Declaration contains a veiled threat to those who under different pretexts seek to evade and avoid jihad, thereby violating the will of God as manifested in the Qur’an and the Sunna of the Prophet. Even more importantly, the Emir boldly redefines the objectives of the Caucasus jihad. It is no longer a national struggle for independence from Russia waged by Chechens and some other ethnic groups/nationalities in the region, namely Daghestanis, Ingushes, Kabardians, Balkarians, Karachais, Adyghes (Circassians), and so on. Rather, his movement and new state are part and parcel of the universal confrontation between Islam and its enemies worldwide. Says Umarov:

We are an inseparable part of the Islamic Ummah. I am saddened by the position of those Muslims who declare as their enemies only those kuffar who attacked them directly. And at the same time, they seek support and sympathy from other kuffar, forgetting that all infidels are one nation. Today in Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Palestine our brothers are fighting. Those, who have attacked Muslims wherever they are, are our enemies, common enemies. Our enemy is not Rusnya only, only, but also America, England, Israel and anyone who wages war against
Islam and Muslims. This phrase was later omitted from Umarov’s statement, but was preserved on some websites, such as Jihad Unspun: http://www.jihadunspun.com/intheatre_internal.php?article=109196.

10 Ibid.


12 http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Bsword%5D=8fd5893941d69d0be3f378576261ae3e &tx_ttnews%5Bany_of_the_words%5D=astemirov&tx_ttnews%5Bpointer%5D=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=45 96&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=7&cHash=196e45ea61

The anti-Western message of the Declaration was reiterated and reinforced by 47-year-old Movladi Udugov, the former minister of information of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, who is widely believed to be the mastermind behind the Declaration.\textsuperscript{14} It was further reaffirmed by Dokka Umarov in his May 2008 interview aimed at clarifying the political and religious positions of the Emirate’s leadership.\textsuperscript{15} We shall revisit this issue later on.

It should be pointed out that despite the vociferous protests of the Chechen foreign minister in exile Akhmet Zaka(y)ev (who is currently based in London) and a number of other secular-minded Chechen advocates of Chechnya’s independence residing in the West, the Middle East and Russia, the majority of Chechen field commanders on the ground have accepted Umarov’s Declaration of the Caucasus Emirate. Their acceptance amounts to their de facto recognition of him as their Commander-in-Chief in the on-going Islamist jihad against the Russian government and its local backers.\textsuperscript{16} No less, or perhaps even more importantly, Umarov’s claims have been recognized by the commanders of mujahideen in the neighboring republics of the Northern Caucasus some of whom were appointed to high positions in the governing structures of the Emirate (such as the aforementioned Kabardian amir Astemirov, who

\textsuperscript{14} Movladi Udugov, “Voina id’iot za obraz zhizni....” p. 2, \url{http://www.kavkazcenter.com/russ/content/2007/11/28/54654_print.html}; for Udugov’s alleged role of the mastermind of the Declaration see, for instance, Mairbek Vatchagaev, “Zakaev’s Attempts to Persuade Dokka Umarov Are in Vain,” \textit{Jamestown Foundation, North Caucasus Weekly}, Vol. 9: issue 24, June 19, 2008 (available on-line at \url{http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Bswords%5D=8fd5893941d69d0be3f378576261ae3e&tx_ttnews%5Bany_of_the_words%5D=astemirov&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=5007&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=7&cHash=5ad7a0e12e}).

\textsuperscript{15} Dokka Umarov, “A Great Deal of Purification.”

assumed the post of the chief Islamic judge (qadi) of the Emirate). Some Chechen field commanders originally opposed to the creation of “a mythical new state in all of the Caucasus” have eventually come around, leaving Zakaev and other secular-minded Chechen leaders in the position of generals without an army. Their vocal protests that the abolition of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria amounts to the ultimate betrayal of the one-and-a-half-decade-old Chechen struggle for independence have fallen on deaf ears. Furthermore, the leaders of the “emiratchiks,” as they are dubbed by their secular-minded opponents, hastened to remove their detractors from their largely symbolic posts. Most notably, Zakaev himself has lost his post as foreign minister (in exile) of the now-defunct Chechen Republic of Ichkeria. Other prominent Chechen “nay-sayers,” such as the popular bard Timur Mutsura(y)ev, were denounced as potential or even actual collaborators with President Ramzan Kadyrov’s pro-Russian regime in Chechnya.

In the Western media, the emergence of an Islamist emirate in the Caucasus was greeted with apprehension as a potential ally of al-Qa’ida and a magnet for jihadists of all stripes. The same is largely true of the Russian media and analytical publications, although some of the latter

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18 Vatchagaev, “Zakaev’s Attempts.”
19 The secular-minded detractors of the Emirate have also mockingly called the leaders of the Emirate “green commissars” to underscore their Bolshevik-style intolerance and radicalism; see, for instance, [http://www.meforum.org/1931/the-rise-of-the-chechen-emirate](http://www.meforum.org/1931/the-rise-of-the-chechen-emirate).
20 Mutsara(y)ev was ridiculed by a mujahid poet in a long poem entitled “The Fallen Bard,” see [http://www.kavkazcenter.com/russ/content/2008/08/12/60137.shtml](http://www.kavkazcenter.com/russ/content/2008/08/12/60137.shtml).
have occasionally exhibited a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon at hand than their Western counterparts.\(^\text{22}\)

In his lengthy defense of the Declaration that appeared about a month after its first publication on the Internet (November 28, 2007), Udugov provides a detailed justification of this radical shift in the strategy and goals of the anti-Russian resistance movement in the Northern Caucasus. Being in essence the Emirate’s most detailed manifesto so far,\(^\text{23}\) it deserves a closer look. Udugov begins by stridently denouncing Chechen critics of the Emirate, focusing on the figure of the “deposed” foreign minister Akhmad Zakaev, whom he dismisses as a sellout and would-be collaborator with Kadyrov’s “apostate” regime.\(^\text{24}\) At the same time, looking on the bright side, Udugov sees the rift within the Chechen rebel leadership as a timely and healthy separation between the mujahideen and “the alien elements” of the Chechen resistance movement that, in his words, “harbor hatred toward Islam and the Sharia(t)” under the guise of supporting the Chechen jihad.\(^\text{25}\) The loud bemoaning of the demise of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria by “the opponents of the Sharia(t)” is, according to Udugov, not only misguided, but also outright erroneous. It ignores the fact that the Declaration of the Caucasus Emirate simply restores the Sharia(t) states of Chechnya and the Caucasus that were periodically created throughout the late eighteenth and early twentieth centuries under such prominent leaders of the Caucasus jihad as Shaykh Mansur Ushurma (d. 1791), Imam Shamil (d. 1871), and Shaykh Uzun

\(^{22}\) Compare, for instance, “The Caucasus Emirate: Not a New Idea” by Andrei Smirnov (at http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1\&tx_ttnews%5Bswords%5D=8fd5893941d69d0be3f378576261ae3e\&tx_ttnews%5Bany_of_the_words%5D=emirate\&tx_ttnews%5Bpointer%5D=7\&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=4529\&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=7\&cHash=c86e4ac9db) and “Umarov’s Caucasus Emirate: Zero-Sum Game or Capable of Compromise” by Kevin Leahy (at http://www.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/4959).

\(^{23}\) Alongside Astemirov’s account of the events and deliberations leading up to the Declaration, see note 13 above.

\(^{24}\) In the aftermath of the Declaration of the Emirate Zakaev declared himself the prime-minister of the Republic of Ichkeria that was abolished by Umarov’s decree.

\(^{25}\) Udugov, “Voina,” p. 3.
Hajji (d. 1920). Udugov energetically denies any split within the ranks of the Chechen resistance movement. Rather, he describes it as a healthy process of the purification of the movement from anti-Islamic, secular elements. Its outcome will be the final liberation of the true Muslims of the Caucasus from “chimeras and false fears.” According to Udugov, the anti-Islamic elements of the resistance movement who reside in Europe (Udugov mockingly dubs them “Euro-Chechens”) are but the ideological bedfellows of the pro-Moscow “apostates,” namely, Kadyrov and his acolytes. In the words of Udugov,

In London, Moscow and in occupied Johar (Grozny) these people [namely, the opponents of the Emirate] talk about the same things, that is “Wahhabism,” “al-Qa’ida,” and “international terrorism.” They thus use the same language, the same words. Sooner or later they will unite. It does not matter under what pretext this unification will take place, because they have a common enemy….—the muhajideen and the Islamic state.

Udugov pins his hopes on the new generation of devout Muslims who genuinely believe in the basic precepts of Islam and the Sharia(t) law and who refuse to utilize them as simple political and rhetorical tools, as, in his opinion, the “Euro-Chechens” have routinely done. When asked about the exact character of the new state, Udugov flatly rejects all Western forms of

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26 For an illuminating comparison between Uzun Hajj’s emirate and that of Dokku Umarov see Mairbek Vatchagaev’s “Uzun Haji’s and Dokka Umarov’s Emirates: A Retrospective,” Jamestown Foundation, North Caucasus Weekly, vol. 9: issue 10, March 13, 2008 (available on-line at http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Bswords%5D=8fd5893941d69d0be3f378576261ae3e&tx_ttnews%5Bany_of_the_words%5D=uzun%20haji%27s&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=4785&tx_ttnews%5BackPid%5D=7&cHash=b40b431a5c); for the history of the Islamic movements led by these three leaders see my articles “Ushurma, Mansur”; “Shamil”; and “al-Kabk (the Caucasus),” pt.3 in the on-line edition of the Encyclopaedia of Islam, 2d ed. at http://www.brillonline.nl.

27 Udugov, “Voyna,” p. 4; this idea is echoed by Astemirov who argues that “the [only] difference between the democrats [of the Republic of Ichkeria], who reside in Europe, and between today’s Kremlin’s stooges in Chechnya is that the former want to live under the wing of the West, whereas the latter under the wing of Russia,” see “Amir Saifulla o protsesse,” p. 17.
government, such as democracy, communism, monarchy, totalitarianism, and so on, as being contrary to Islam. In his view, every state is based on an ideology, the rest being derivative. Since there is only one true ideology—Islam, the state can be either Islamic or pagan (idolatrous). Quoting a prophetic hadith, he predicts the eventual cessation of divisions within the world-wide Muslim community followed by the rise of a rightly-guided caliphate. These goals can only be achieved by a consistent and uncompromising application of the divine will as manifested in the Qur’an and the Sharia(t) law. Using examples from the history of the first Muslim community in Medina, Udugov energetically denies the legitimacy and validity of tactical concessions to Russia and/or the West advocated by the exiled “Euro-Chechens.” On the practical plane, this position implies rejection of international diplomacy and refusal to have recourse to its forums and institutions, such as the United Nations or the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. Udugov derides the alleged diplomatic achievements of the “Euro-Chechen” diaspora in Europe and the US as a dangerous self-delusion. In his word, “seeking the confirmation of our legitimacy from our enemies” is ridiculous, because “one cannot complain to one group of kafirs about [the misdeeds] of the other.” Attempts by the secularized “Euro-Chechens” in exile to please the Western governments and public at large by removing any mention of the Islamic state from their political programs are denounced as wrongheaded and futile. The “Euro-Chechens” themselves might view this as a clever tactical stratagem, but it is in fact a betrayal of Islam. Udugov points to the failure of such compromises between Islamic movements and secular rulers in Nasser’s Egypt, in King Husayn’s Jordan, in Kerimov’s Uzbekistan, and in Atatürk’s Turkey. Only an uncompromising, consistent faithfulness to Islamic values and the Sharia(t) law, in his view, can guarantee the Muslims true freedom and independence from

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28 Ibid., pp. 5-7.
29 Ibid., p. 8.
Western control. This goal, he insists emphatically, can only be achieved by a relentless prosecution of jihad and, if necessary, dying “in the path of God.” “It is,” says Udugov, “time for us to decide whether we should be praying in the direction of Strasbourg or Mecca.”30 “Islam is indeed a religion of peace, but only when it is in power.”31

The new generation of Muslims, according to Udugov, should free themselves from the empty fantasies about “the language of diplomacy” or “international law” that are still being entertained by the older generation of Chechen leaders in their naive faith in Western ideas and institutions. The events of the recent decades, he argues, have proved his opponents wrong. The West and Russia have always seen Islam and Muslims as their enemies, and their attitude is not about to change. “We should,” concludes Udygov, “act according the norms of the Sharia(t)t, and rely not on the [international] public opinion or the good will of the kafirs, but on Allah alone.”32 “There is no plurality of religions, there are only two faiths—Islam and paganism. Likewise, there is no plurality of types of statehood. There are only two types of states—a state that is based on the sovereignty of God, and a state that rests on the sovereignty of Taghut [namely, pagan law] that can manifest itself in different forms from dictatorship to democracy.”33

The principal points of Udugov’s credo are echoed in the pronouncements of the rebel amir of Kabarda, Balkaria, and Karachai Anzor Astemirov, who maintains his own website

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30 Ibid., p. 11.
31 Ibid., p. 13.
33 Ibid., pp. 20-21.
Like Udugov, he rejects “democratic system of government and the pagan convictions and teachings associated with it.” Defending the establishment of the Caucasus Emirate against its secular-minded critics, Astemirov argues that

Human rights, international law, referendum, freedom of speech and belief, the expression of the will of the people—all these notions are incompatible with our religion and have absolutely nothing to do with the mujahideen of the Caucasus.

He then proceeds to add a moral and ethical dimension to the debate between the Islamists and their liberal opponents, saying:

[All] sensible people see the [detrimental] results of permissiveness and Western pop culture. Freedom of belief to which the kafirs are calling is but freedom to be an atheist. From the very early age our children are being encouraged towards lechery and shamelessness; their schools impose upon them [the ideas of] democracy, Christianity, Darwinism and other destructive doctrines. The least they try to teach Muslims is to be tolerant of evil and unbelief.

There is nothing particularly new about Udugov’s and Astemirov’s ideas. They can be traced back to the anti-Western, Salafi creed of Sayyid Qutb (executed in 1966) and his followers across the Muslim world, on the one hand, and the puritan teachings of Muhammad Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab (d. 1791), on the other. The influence of the former is evident in Udugov’s and Astemirov’s common rejection as “pagan” or “idolatrous” of Western social, cultural and

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34 The Dagestani front of the mujahideen movement also has its own website: [http://jamaatshariat.com/](http://jamaatshariat.com/). These sister websites usually replicate the postings of the kavkazcenter.com, while at the same time giving more attention to the events in their respective geographical areas.  
political values and institutions and in their blanket condemnation of any society not governed by
the Sharia(t) law as being in the state of pre-Islamic “ignorance” (jahiliyya). The Wahhabi
influence comes to the fore in the ubiquitous use by Udugov and Astemirov of such typical
Wahhabi notions as *kufr al-tawhid* (“infidelity [caused by departure from] the principle of
monotheism”), *kufr al-wala’* (“infidelity [caused by] associating with infidels”), *wala’ wa bara’*
(“[exclusive] association [with fellow monotheists] and dissociation [from infidels/apostates]”),
*shirk* (“polytheism”), *bid’a* (“heretical innovation [in religion]”), and so on. Both Sayyid Qutb
and Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab considered jihad to be the only effective remedy for the evils of
ungodly existence into which their respective societies had sunk. Udugov and Astemirov are of
the same opinion.

What interests us here is the ways in which these general Islamist/Salafi ideas and the
jihadist ideology of the Caucasus Emirate in particular are disseminated and packaged via the
Internet and other media. What does this tell us about the semi-virtual polity launched by
Umarov with a stroke of pen and how does its proclamation and on-going presence in the
cyberspace impact our understanding of recent Islamist/Salafi movements? How do such
movements conceive themselves and how do they project their image to the outside world? To
answer these questions, I would like to briefly examine the contents of the Emirate’s principal
website kavkazcenter.org, then proceed to present my tentative conclusions about the
implications and meanings of the project launched by Umarov, Udugov, Astemirov, and their-
comrades-in-arms.

A few words about the lay-out of the site. On its top we see the portraits of the eleven
field commanders of the Caucasus mujahideen who hail from different republics of the Northern
Caucasus and are supposed to represent major regional branches of the resistance movement under Umarov’s command. Some of them are no longer alive (for example, amir Mu’az of Daghestan), others hide their faces to avoid being identified by Federal security forces. The images of the fallen amirs are quickly replaced by those of their successors. The site’s content is available in Russian, Ukrainian, Turkish, Arabic and English, giving us an idea of its target audiences. The Russian version of the site is updated daily and contains information that is often missing or abbreviated on other language sites. Each language site is designed to cater to the cultural and religious sensitivities of the target audience without, however, compromising the site’s overall ideological message. The Russian site is occasionally shut down by hackers who may or may not have connection to the Russian Security Service (FSB).

The kavkazcenter.org site contains numerous rubrics and links, such as “Opinions,” “Literature,” “Photographs,” “Interviews,” “Analysis,” “History,” and so on. On its home page one can watch video clips featuring interviews with amirs of the mujahideen, a portrait gallery of martyrs, and a running band with images of “Russian atrocities” in Chechnya and Ingushetia. There are occasional video clips deemed to critically portray or ridicule Kadyrov’s regime in Chechnya. The underlying theme of the site is the world-wide jihad that Muslims are waging against their infidel oppressors. It determines the site’s focus on the hotbeds of conflict between Muslim mujahideen and their adversaries, such as Afghanistan, Pakistan and Kashmir, the Philippines, Somalia, the Indonesian Archipelago, Eastern Turkestan/Xinjiang and Palestine. Special attention is given to the jihad in Afghanistan with the Taliban depicted as the avant-garde of valiant defenders of Islam against the infidel Western aggressors and their local clients.

Reading the news from these various Islamist fronts over a protracted period of times gives the

visitor an impression of a permanent life-and-death struggle between the Muslims and their enemies. The site depicts the former as fearless warriors fighting against great odds, yet scoring one victory after another. Their opponents are portrayed as agents of Satan bent on subjugating the Muslims to their ungodly rule and robbing Muslim countries of their wealth. A permanent rubric describes the perversity of the Russian state, the unscrupulousness, ruthlessness and immorality of its rulers and the no-less-revolting depravity and moral decay of their subjects. The level of anti-Russian hatred is staggering, despite the occasional attempts by the website masters to separate ordinary Russians from their unscrupulous and despotic rulers. The only good Russians are those who have dared to convert to Islam. Some of them are contributors to the website, who voice their disgust at Russia’s former and current crimes against humanity. They routinely denounce Russian religion, history and culture as ungodly, both servile and authoritarian, and cowardly to boot—in short, abominable by any human standard. Russia’s baseness is juxtaposed with the highly moral, valiant and altruistic ethos of the Caucasus Muslims exemplified by the Emirate’s mujahideen. Also frequently mentioned are instances of persecution and hate crimes against Muslims in the Russian Federation, Guantanamo, and Europe.

In line with the Emirate’s ideological premises outlined above, its site starkly divides the whole world into the faithful followers of the Sharia(t) and the adherents of man-made, “pagan” laws and customs (Taghut), who are identified as “infidels” (Arab. kafirs or kuffar). Those Muslims who live by these customs and enforce these laws and are condemned as murtads, namely “apostates,” who under the Sharia(t) code are subject to capital punishment. For the

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38 The correct transliteration of this Arabic word is murtadd, but the germination of the final consonant of the Arabic stem is ignored in the transliteration used by the website masters.
supporters of the Emirate, the pro-Russian president Kadyrov of Chechnya and his officials are the prime embodiment of murtads. Those Muslims who continue to observe some minimal duties of Islam, but refuse to join the ranks of the mujahideen or dare to criticize them are labeled *munafiqs* or “hypocrites.” The borderline between the murtads and the munafiqs is rather blurred. On some occasions, the munafiqs are described as “children of the Devil,” who are not only blind and stupid but also morally depraved. Their *qibla* (direction of prayer) is the Moscow Kremlin; they violate every conceivable Islamic prohibition, for instance, by “sipping vodka like water” to celebrate Russian “pagan holidays,” then having fist-fights with their drug-addicts of sons. Their only difference from the “apostates” appears to be that they do not actively support or participate in the “abominations” of the ruling clique of murtads. Thus, while President Kadyrov is an out-and-out apostate, because he believes in “the trinity of the Sharia(t), tariqa(t) and the Russian constitution” and celebrates the “pagan holiday of New Year” dressed as “Father Frost,” the secularized Euro-Chechens of the diaspora with Zakaev as their spokesman are afflicted with “hypocrisy” due to their wrongheaded faith in “international laws, the UN Charter, and all manner [of similar] aberrations” (*nenormal’nosti*). It seems that the only difference between Kadyrov and Zakaev is that the latter does not actively serve the infidel Russian state. However, Zakaev’s attempts to place the secular Chechen constitution above the Qur’an effectively place him outside the pale of true Islam and into the category of “false

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39 A Qur’anic term originally applied to the Prophet’s opponents in Medina, who adopted Islam outwardly out of expediency, while harboring deep-seated unbelief.
41 “Novatorstvo,” pp. 2-3.
42 “Ded Moroz i kadyrovskaja ‘troitsa,’” [http://www.kavkazcenter.com/russ/content/2008/12/04/62601.html](http://www.kavkazcenter.com/russ/content/2008/12/04/62601.html).
43 Amir Supian, “Prezhde chem…,” p. 3.
prophets.”44 In any event, both murtads and munafiqs are consistently dissociated from the cohort of true Muslim monotheists exemplified by the Emirate’s mujahideen.

The ideologists of the Emirate tend to see traces of the pagan Taghut lurking everywhere—in celebrations of the New Year and birthdays by Muslim families and even in Muslim athletes’ taking part in the Olympic Games due to their pagan origins. Even the rulers of Saudi Arabia do not escape the ideologists’ blame, because they allow their national team to circumambulate (tawaf) the “sacred” Olympic fire during the ceremony of the opening of the Olympiad.45 This, of course, is nothing but a blameworthy innovation and a conscious or unconscious concession to the pagan Taghut. No wonder that in one of website postings the Saudi ruling family is branded as “heads of hypocrisy.”46

However, it is Sufi Islam and its local leaders (shaykhs and ustadhs) that bear the brunt of the Emirate’s righteous ire at the corruptive forces of Taghut. The Qadiri Sufi dance performed collectively by members of a Chechen Sufi community is ridiculed as a pagan worship imitating monkey-play. Sufi teachings about the unity of all being47 are condemned as shirk and kufr, namely, “polytheism” and “unbelief.” This intolerant attitude toward Sufism is hardly surprising given the fact that President Ramzan Kadyrov has made it an ideological alternative to the politically active Salafi interpretations of Islam that he has routinely denounced as “Wahhabism,” “terrorism,” or “extremism.” The cozy relations between the Sufis and the ruling elites of

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45 Amir Supian, “Prezhdem chem…..,” p. 3.
Daghestan and other republics of the Northern Caucasus\textsuperscript{48} have not been lost on the ideologists of the Emirate, rendering their vituperations against Sufi beliefs and practices ever more ferocious. The following verses are typical of their deeply ingrained resentment of things Sufi:

Watch how the Sufi disciples have grown blind and how fear has turned them into women!

They are but moral cripples, who are being led astray by blind men [who claim to possess] eyesight.

These miserable wretches dream of nothing but being pussy-cats of the fraudulent Sufi masters (shaykhs)!

They [Sufi disciples] spread gossips, like old women, while also being greedy, and their masters are despicable agents and commissars of Satan who are weaving cozy nooks for themselves from the words of God, then, like ostriches hide their heads in the sand!

Fed with a fatty broth, they are like a hoard of dirty pigs; they fawn before the [Russian] kafirs and are slaves of the butchers of the Kremlin!\textsuperscript{49}

In short, the Sufis are invariably portrayed the complete antipodes of the Emirate mujahideen and the “pure” Islam they claim to practice and profess.

\textsuperscript{48} For details see my article “Contextualizing the Sufi-Salafi Conflict: From the Northern Caucasus to Hadramawt,” \textit{Middle Eastern Studies}, vol. 43:4, pp. 503-530.

\textsuperscript{49} Shamil Mansur, “V edinstve sila musul’man”; \url{http://www.kavkazcenter.com/russ/content/2009/02/24/64175.shtml}. 
Even this very cursory survey of the contents of the Emirate website is sufficient to demonstrate its heavy use of religiously charged rhetoric and terminology. This is hardly surprising, as many of the younger amirs of the newly formed state have received their religious education abroad, while others, at the very least, have studied Islamic theological and juridical literature and the Arabic language in formal or informal settings. The interviews and statements of the mujahideen leaders are richly sprinkled with long quotations from the Qur’an and hadith. They are fond of uttering standard Arabic formulas that are commonly associated with piety and righteousness, such as “There is no power or might except from Allah,” “May God guide us on the straight path,” “I seek refuge in God from the accursed Satan,” “Praise be to God, the One and Only,” etc. The public speeches of and interviews with some foreign-educated mujahideen feature an almost Macaronic mixture of Russian and Arabic and, more rarely, also Chechen or any other local vernaculars. Many religious hymns in praise of jihad and martyrdom posted on the website are available in Arabic only. The frequent use of Arabic religious terms in poetry and prose composed by contributors to the Emirate website occasionally requires an annotation to explain their meaning to the initiated. When speaking before camera, young amirs often have to provide a running commentary on or translation of the Arabic words and phrases they use to make their messages intelligible to Muslims not steeped in Islamic theology and jurisprudence. In this way, the pronouncements of the Emirate’s leaders, poets and writers become sacralized and endowed with a higher authority associated with Arabic, the language of the revelation. The use of Arabic religious terminology is far from superficial. It decisively shapes the very

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conceptual framework of the speakers on behalf of the Emirate as the following quotation from the Emirate’s chief qadi Anzor Astemirov finely demonstrates:

_Taqlid_ (that is, following the opinion of [authoritative] scholars) is not allowed when it comes to the fundamentals of the _aqida_\(^{51}\) (that is, _usul al-din_). Before one can accept somebody’s statement concerning a matter of creed, one should ask for a clear _dalil_ (that is, a proof [derived] from authentic sources of the Sharia(t) law). As for the _furu’_ (that is, branches or details) of the Sharia(t) law, in this respect we follow the opinion of those who have knowledge [of such things] and do not need to request a _dalil_ on each issue.

The gist of Astemirov’s statement is that the Emirate’s mujahideen need not have extensive scholarly expertise to understand and practice the basic principles of their religion (which includes the command to wage jihad), while they should turn to religious specialists when dealing with ambiguous matters pertaining to the implementation of the Sharia(t) law. Astemirov’s statement comes in response to those critics of the Emirate who argue that its mujahideen do not possess the requisite theological and legal expertise to declare and wage jihad. The theological trappings of Astemirov’s response are significant—he counters a theological/juridical objection to the mujahideen’s practices with an answer couched in Arabic religious terminology. In this way he demonstrates his religious expertise, while calling in doubt the religious credentials of his critics, the religious officials of Kabardino-Balkaria, who try to dissuade their parishioners from engaging in jihad against the republican authorities.

\(^{51}\) Interestingly, Astemirov leaves this Arabic word for “creed” or “profession of faith” without translation, which indicates that it is already familiar not only to the mujahideen but to his potential listeners/readers outside the movement as well. However, he deems it necessary to explain the meaning of _usul al-din_. The fact that the explanation itself contains an Arabic religious term is quite telling.
Here it is not the place for a detailed discussion of the publications posted on the website. One issue that stands out and, in my opinion, deserves at least a brief mention is the wide use of fiction and poetry to promote the Emirate’s jihadist ideology. While many poems published on the website may strike the visitor as half-baked doggerels (faulty rhymes, stylistic infelicities, grammatical mistakes, etc.) one must admit that they are successful in conveying the chief messages of the mujahideen in a striking, memorable manner. The murtads and the munafiqs are lampooned in numerous satires that depict them as an immoral, revolting scum of the earth that is completely devoid of any traces humanity. Subservient to their no-less depraved and vile Russian masters, they have no right to remain on the face of the earth. In this way, their murder by the mujahideen is implicitly justified. How can one feel squeamish or guilty of squashing a poisonous snake or a scorpion? In contrast, the heroic poems posted on the website portray the mujahideen as the prime model for all conscientious Muslims to emulate. Among themselves the mujahideen are always mutually respectful, supportive, generous, humble, and brotherly. On the battle-field they are courageous and willing to sacrifice their lives for the sake of their comrades. Unlike their cowardly and depraved opponents, they never leave their fallen or wounded brethren on the battle-field, and so on. Their deep faith renders them incapable of committing any moral sin. The website consistently encourages young Muslim men of the Caucasus to imitate them and to join their ranks. In general, one gets an impression that the region’s pious and god-fearing youth is the principal target audience of the Emirate’s ideological outreach. The website contents explicitly appeals to the youthful maximalism and idealism of this constituency. Given the clandestine nature of the guerilla warfare in the Northern Caucasus the extent of the webpage recruiting success is hard to gage.
Some Tentative Observations and Conclusions

The creation of the Caucasus Emirate is the direct outcome of the decade-and-a-half-long post-Soviet turmoil in a region that enjoyed neither social stability nor economic prosperity even in its better times, under the heavy but relatively generous hand of the Soviet regime. During the Soviet period the subsidized economies of the North Caucasus republics managed to provide for the basic needs of their populations. Then came Gorbachev’s Perestroika and the fall of the Soviet Union bringing in its wake a social and political turmoil on an unprecedented scale. Several military conflicts flared up, the Russo-Chechen war of 1994-1996 being the most severe and devastating one.\(^52\) It destroyed thousands of human lives, much of the republic’s Soviet-period infrastructure and all but ruined its economy. It also precipitated the rise of anti-Russian resistance movement in the name of Islam across the region. It is common knowledge among experts on the Northern Caucasus that the deadly struggle between the Russian Federal troops and the Chechen separatists has led to the progressive marginalization of Chechen nationalist ideology espoused by its founders in favor of an Islamist one. This was a natural outcome of the lack of international recognition of Chechen right to secede from Russia and, later on, the failure of the leadership of the first independent Chechen state (1996-1999) to provide law and order to its population.

Seen from historical perspective, the recent declaration of the Caucasus Emirate by Umarov, one of the founding fathers of Chechen resistance and state, was not only logical, but, in fact, inevitable. Faced with the military defeat of 1999 and goaded by Russia’s efforts to localize the conflict by co-opting some members of the Chechen elite in return for generous

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\(^{52}\) The other conflicts of that period were the Azeri-Armenian war for Nagorno-Karabakh, the war between Abkhazia and Georgia, and the fight between the Ossetes and Ingush in North Ossetia.
financial infusions from the Federal Center (as well as Moscow’s promises of broad autonomy), the irredentist wing of the Chechen resistance movement had no choice but to appeal to “jihadist international.” While the creators of the Caucasus Emirate may have hoped that their new strategy would give them better access to the resources of rich Islamic states and charities worldwide, their immediate goal is primarily local. It is to unify the fragmented regional pockets of Islamist resistance under the trans-national and trans-ethnic umbrella of an Islamic state. The role of the ideological scaffold of this new political formation was assigned to the Sharia(t) law and anti-Russian jihad.

The founders of the new Islamic polity had good reasons to believe that they would achieve at least some level of success in their bold undertaking. First, the long conflict in Chechnya has spilled into neighboring republics via young Muslim volunteers who at one point or the other joined Chechen resistance; after undergoing baptism by fire in Chechnya, they returned home ready to take on their own ruling establishment (which was and is uniformly secular and pro-Russian) under the banners of Islam. Second, the preaching of the returning veterans of the Russo-Chechen wars fell on a fertile ground due to the numerous popular grievances and discontents in their republics that were generated by local corruption and misrule. The Islamist appeals for justice and equity under the aegis of the Sharia(t) law found an eager hearing among the Caucasus Muslims, especially young ones, who were disgusted by the social and economic status quo and who did not have much hope to make their voices heard under the heavy-handed, corrupt and nepotistic governance of the secular republican elites.

The claim of the Kabardian guerilla leader Anzor Astemirov that he had been advocating for the creation of a supra-ethnic Islamic polity in the Northern Caucasus already in 2005 rings
true. He seems to have persuaded the fourth president of Chechnya Abdul Halim Sadulayev to begin laying the grounds for the declaration of a Sharia(t) state in the entire Northern Caucasus. His untimely death in June 2006 at the hands of Russian special forces interfered with this plan. It was, therefore, only a matter of time for an Islamic state to be declared outside Chechnya by an ambitious mujahid amir such as Astemirov. Faced with this eventuality, it was only natural for Umarov, Udugov and their close circle of followers to seize initiative and declare a Chechen-based Emirate before it was announced elsewhere.

Ideologically, the creation of the Caucasus Emirate may be seen as an attempt by its leaders to bridge, if only on the symbolic and rhetorical level, the vast disparity between the opponents—the still strong and assertive Russian state with its modern armed forces, bureaucracy, and its relatively large economy flush with oil wealth, on the one hand, and the small bands of poorly equipped and underfunded guerilla fighters, no matter how highly motivated and courageous. The scarcity and near-invisibility of the mujahideen’s physical presence on the ground has been partially compensated by their virtual presence in the cyberspace via several rebel websites. Furthermore, one can argue that this virtual presence gives the Caucasus Emirate an aura of invincibility and permanence—while individual mujahideen and their tiny units are being chased and often destroyed by Russian Federal forces, Kadyrov’s militias, and republican police units, the site continues to be updated regularly and to provide its own spin on the events in the region and internationally. Its strident rhetoric and quick reaction to the events on the ground project an image of self-confidence to the outside world—“We are

54 “Amir Seifulla,” pp. 3-4.
still very much there, alive, and have no intention to quit.” This stratagem is consciously designed to facilitate recruitment of young fighters for the Islamist cause.

The other ideological benefit of the self-redefinition of the Chechen independence movement into an Islamic one lies in infusing its members with a feeling of belonging to a global imagined community of the faithful, the *umma.* Chechen fighters and their comrades-in-arms in the neighboring republics of the Northern Caucasus no longer feel alone in their uphill battle against perceived or real injustices and oppression. Rather, they now conceive of themselves as yet another detachment in the powerful army of Muslim sisters and brothers united in a cosmic battle for a lofty, divinely sanctioned cause. This self-perception imbues the Caucasus mujahideen with self-confidence and sense of purpose that localized secessionist movements simply cannot provide. On the negative side, their pursuit of a global agenda inevitably alienates them from secular-minded nationalists whose main goal is to secure their republic’s independence from Russia. Acerbic mutual recriminations ensue, resulting in a fateful split in the ranks of former comrades. Lines of loyalty and ideological underpinnings are now being sharply redrawn, values and principles polarized, and the parting of ways becomes inevitable. This polarization is accentuated by the use of diametrically opposed languages and concepts (Arabic/Islamic versus Russian/Western), appeals to different sources of authority (the Sharia(t) law versus Western secular laws and institutions), and even by outward means of self-expression, such as distinct dress-codes and physical appearance (military fatigues or free-flowing “Islamic” dresses versus well-tailored “secular” suites; Islamic scalp-caps versus

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Western-style hats; unkempt beards versus trimmed ones or no beards at all, etc.). In this way, mutual dissociation is rendered complete and irreversible.

The extensive deployment of Arabic religious terminology by the spokesmen on behalf of the Emirate is meant to accentuate their drastic departure from the secular Russo-centric culture that continues to dominate their societies. We witness, in essence, a concerted attempt by the Caucasus mujahideen to create a new, “Islamic” way to talk about things and conceptualize them. Arabic is deployed as an alternative symbolic capital aimed at setting its users apart from both the Russo-phone/-philic ruling elites of the Northern Caucasus republics as well as the local ethnic nationalists prone to revive and utilize the local vernaculars in order to reassert their newly discovered national identities. A new, Islamic, linguistic community is thus being consciously or subconsciously forged. Its members consciously seek to transcend both Russo-centric and ethno-centric nationalist idioms that have been predominant in their societies over the past one hundred years or so with a view to reaching out to and identifying with the imagined transnational umma based on a single-minded allegiance to the Islamic revelation and the language in which it was expressed.

This remarkable transition from the heady ethnic nationalism of the early post-Soviet period to transnational Islamism, understood as political, social, and cultural action in the name of Islam, is not new of course. It is familiar to us from the recent history of many Middle Eastern countries and regions, such as Egypt, the Maghreb, Jordan and Palestine. In each of these countries this transition had its own logic and driving forces, such as, for instance, the Islamist mobilization of the urban poor, university students and recent migrants from country-side and uniting them with the petty bourgeoisie, low-ranking army officers and state officials in their
shared aspiration to establish a just and equitable social order on the basis of the Sharia(t) law.\textsuperscript{56} In the Northern Caucasus, declaring the establishment of Sharia(t) law and order as the ultimate goal of local Islamist resistance movements serves as an effective means of overcoming the ethnic and clannish fragmentation of local societies that has prevented them from forming a unified front in the face of Russian domination. In this respect, there is some semblance between the ideology of the Caucasus Emirate and the Sharia(t)-enforcing strategy adopted by the leaders of the Caucasus resistance movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As with Shamil’s and Uzun Hajji’s Imamates (1832-1859 and 1919-1920, respectively), Umarov’s claims to be an implementer and enforcer of the will of God as enshrined in the Sharia(t) has become a means of not only legitimizing his new state but also of overcoming divisions among the local ethnic communities and the divergent aspirations of their elites. Time will show, how effective or otherwise this new strategy will turn out to be.

Having just mentioned the historical parallels to building Islamic states in the region, we cannot avoid pursuing them further. When, following the collapse of the Russian Empire in 1917, the region’s independence from the new, weakly Russian state became a strong possibility, the ranks of its advocates among the mountaineers of the Northern Caucasus were split over the place and scope of the Sharia(t) legislation in the life of their societies.\textsuperscript{57} One group, “the supporters of the Sharia” (Rus. \textit{shariatisty}), demanded a full and unconditional implementation of Sharia norms in all spheres of public and political life. Their opponents, the left-leaning liberal intelligentsia of mountaineer societies, on the other hand, sought to restrict its writ to the realm

\textsuperscript{56} As demonstrated in Gilles Kepel’s \textit{Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam}, I.B. Tauris, London, 2002 in regard to some Middle eastern and North African societies (especially, Egypt and Algria).

\textsuperscript{57} At that time (1920), the republics of the Northern Caucasus united into the Autonomous Mountain Soviet Socialist Republic (see my article “Kabk” in the 2d edition of the \textit{Encyclopaedia of Islam}, E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1953-2004, \textit{Supplement Volume}, p. 498); also available on-line at \url{http://www.brillonline.nl}. 
of private conviction and worship and to use secular codes to regulate public relations, the legal sphere and politics of the mountaineer federation. This latter group eventually triumphed (1922) thanks in large part to the support of Russia’s Bolshevik state. In retrospect, it can be argued that the Sharia(t) faction probably stood a better chance of resisting the imposition of Bolshevik rule on the mountaineers due to the strong support it enjoyed among the masses. This may indeed have been the case then. However, now, after seventy years of Soviet atheist rule and in the face Russia’s current determination to keep its grip on the region at all costs, the viability of an Islamic state in the Northern Caucasus is far from obvious. What cannot be disputed is that both armed and ideological struggle against Russian domination and its local backers is likely to continue under Islamic/Islamist slogans for years, if not decades to come.

Finally, I would like to briefly mention at least one important international implication of the Declaration of the Caucasus Emirate. It has no doubt been welcomed by professional mujahideen world-wide who see it as a much needed opportunity to open yet another front of international jihad. If it manages to survive military repression, Umarov’s Emirate is likely become a rallying point and worthy cause for the new generation of mujahideen who have missed action in Afghanistan, Kashmir, Bosnia, and Iraq and are now on the lookout for a new theater of operations. Again, time will show how realistic or otherwise their expectations turn out to be.

58 Ibid.
59 See, for instance, Vatchgaev, “Uzun Haji’s.”