

Prospects for Islamic Radicalism and Violent Extremism in the North Caucasus and Central Asia

PONARS Eurasia Memo No. 28

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August 2008

The decision by leaders of the armed separatist movement in Chechnya in the late 1990s to embrace a radical Islamic agenda raised concerns that Islamic terrorist groups would seek to establish strongholds and recruit followers among the large Muslim populations in the former USSR and, specifically, the North Caucasus and Central Asia (especially Tajikistan and Uzbekistan). This memo focuses on two related but distinct questions: What is the likelihood that radical Islamic sentiment will become widespread in these regions over the next several years? What is the prospect that violent Islamic extremists will use terrorism to destabilize local regimes and promote their goal of establishing an Islamic caliphate throughout the region?

Two preliminary points should be noted. First, it is safe to assume that, all else being equal, the greater the spread of radical Islamic sentiment through the North Caucasus and Central Asia, the greater the likelihood that violent Islamic extremists will emerge in those regions and resort to terrorist attacks against local authorities and civilians. Even though many Islamic fundamentalists do not condone terrorism, their teachings create a milieu conducive to the rise of fanatical individuals and groups who are determined to rely on political violence. Second, even if radical Islamic sentiment does not become more prevalent in the North Caucasus and Central Asia, small groups of committed Islamic extremists might still use terrorist acts to foment instability in the

region. This is essentially what happened in the North Caucasus in the late 1990s when small groups of Islamic extremists led by Shamil Basaev and Ibn al-Hattab destabilized the elected Chechen government of Aslan Maskhadov. In August 1999 they carried out armed incursions from Chechnya into Dagestan for the ostensible purpose of uniting the two republics in an Islamic caliphate. These raids, which were eventually rebuffed by the Russian army and security forces, helped to precipitate renewed large-scale warfare with the Russian federal government.

Evidence from the North Caucasus and Central Asia, including surveys and focus groups I co-organized in the spring of 2008, does not bode well for the future, although the prognoses vary from area to area. Recent developments and longer-term trends have contributed to the growth of radical Islamic sentiment and the emergence of Islamic extremists intent on using violence for criminal as well as political purposes. Even though the latest Russian-Chechen war has been largely in abeyance since 2006, the aftereffects of the war have exacerbated local conditions in the North Caucasus and Central Asia (especially Uzbekistan and Tajikistan), providing fecund ground for Islamic extremists. There are few signs that Russian and Central Asian authorities are ready to adopt policies that will forestall violent instability.

Official Concern about the Threat

For both Russia and Central Asia, the threat of violent Islamic extremism has been a high priority since the breakup of the USSR. As early as September 1994, a few months before Russia launched its first war in Chechnya, the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) warned that:

Islamic extremism has a highly negative effect on the crisis situations on the territory of the Commonwealth of Independent States... Of late, Islamic extremism has intensified as a movement aiming to spread Islam by violence, to suppress opposing forces, and to change the secular nature of the state. The impact of this extremism has manifested itself in both Tajikistan and the Caucasus conflict zone. However, the problem of the spread of Islamic extremism is not at all locally confined.

Whatever the merits of this assessment in 1994, it still constitutes the Russian government's basic appraisal of the situation in the North Caucasus and Central Asia and is shared by most Central Asian governments.

The problem, however, is that at least some of the steps taken to counter Islamic threats have been counterproductive. The initial war in Chechnya (1994-1996) proved to be a political and military fiasco for the Russian government. As a direct result of the war, violent Islamic extremists were able to gain sway in Chechnya and Dagestan during the interregnum prior to the start of the second war in 1999. The rise of these violent Islamic radicals exacerbated the situation in Uzbekistan. Uzbek president Islam Karimov adopted highly repressive policies against moderate as well as radical Islamic organizations, fueling grassroots anger and resentment and giving greater legitimacy to

extremist groups. The links between violent radicals in the North Caucasus and Central Asia (especially Uzbekistan) were facilitated by the heavy-handedness of official policies.

Instability in the region was further augmented by chronically high levels of unemployment, low standards of living, and widespread poverty. In mid-2005, the Russian chief envoy in the North Caucasus, Dmitry Kozak, sent a classified report to Putin and the Russian parliament warning that the North Caucasus was already a “macro-region of sociopolitical and economic instability” and was on the verge of “unraveling” through “permanent destabilization.” That description was just as pertinent to parts of Central Asia. Kozak served for three years as envoy in the region and achieved considerable political and economic improvements. Nevertheless, the magnitude of the task was so great that daunting problems remained even after he returned to Moscow in September 2007. Similarly, in Uzbekistan, where a brutal crackdown in the eastern city of Andijon in May 2005 crushed the near-term threat of a “color revolution,” the Karimov government’s failure to remedy enormous economic and social problems has magnified widespread disaffection with his many years of harsh rule.

Recent Trends

In the past few years, efforts to combat Islamic extremist movements in the North Caucasus (especially in Ingushetia and Dagestan) and Central Asia have often led to the repression of moderate Islamic groups (or at least those that failed to curry favor with the authorities). When police and security forces have searched for Islamic radicals, they have often resorted to destructive raids in apartment buildings, mass roundups of people in mosques or Islamic organizations, and routine harassment of young people gathered near mosques. These heavy-handed tactics have bred further resentment. Surveys and focus groups in the two regions in the spring of 2008 reveal that nearly half of residents aged 18 to 30 believe that “the law enforcement agencies are not held properly accountable for their actions” and can “operate with impunity even when they cause harm to innocent people.”

High levels of unemployment, especially among young people, have worsened the problem. In Dagestan and Ingushetia, the unemployment rate has been around 30-40 percent, and youth unemployment has been as high as 70 percent in many areas. In Tajikistan, unemployment has reached as high as 60 percent in some regions, with youth unemployment reaching 80-90 percent. In Uzbekistan, the unemployment rate has been considerably lower, but youth unemployment has consistently been 15-20 percent, and underemployment has been pervasive. Mass surveys in the North Caucasus and Tajikistan reveal widespread dissatisfaction with the “lack of economic opportunity.” Young people are especially inclined to believe that they will never “be able to get a job [they] really want.”

Widespread anger at corruption has been a further stimulus to the growth of radical Islamic sentiment. The surveys and focus groups reveal profound alienation from

governments that are perceived as “systematically corrupt.” This perception is especially widely held in Ingushetia, where the abusive and egregiously corrupt rule of President Murat Zyazikov, a former KGB general installed by Putin in May 2002, has stoked public hostility and anger. Kozak tried to replace Zyazikov several times but was unable to secure Putin’s approval. The consequences have been ominous. Chechen separatist guerrillas have increasingly used Ingushetia as a safe haven, and the number of Chechen fighters on Ingush territory is now much larger than in Chechnya itself. They have forged links with Ingush extremist groups, many of whom were inspired and helped by Shamil Basaev. Over the past two years, the extremists have carried out daily bombings, assassinations, and other terrorist attacks in Ingushetia; at times, the situation has threatened to dissolve into civil war.

Although attempts by Islamic groups in the North Caucasus to mount overt political opposition have been ruthlessly suppressed, local authorities have made some concessions to Islamic traditions that, over the long term, could end up fortifying and even emboldening Islamic fundamentalists. These concessions have been adopted at the behest of officially approved Islamic clerics who are seeking to burnish their credentials and increase their political influence. In many cases, however, the steps overlap with a fundamentalist agenda. In Ingushetia, for example, *sharia* courts have been operating at the republic level and in localities since 1999, albeit with certain restrictions. The republic-level *sharia* court in Ingushetia handled more than 600 cases in 2007 alone. Such courts have also been set up in Dagestan, though on a more localized basis. The regions of Dagestan in which *sharia* courts flourish are precisely the areas in which radical Islamic sentiment is strongest. In Chechnya, President Ramzan Kadyrov has instituted mandatory Islamic programming on local television, aggressively promoted Islamic training in schools, required women to wear headscarves, and prepared to introduce *sharia* law throughout the republic.

The situation in Central Asia is somewhat more complex. Karimov has brutally squelched any hint of Islamic political opposition. In Tajikistan, on the other hand, the Islamic Renaissance Party functions as a legal opposition party with an Islamic agenda, and the leader of the party, Muhiddin Kabiri, is a member of parliament. *Sharia* law has been adopted in some areas of Tajikistan, notably the town of Chorkuh, where a strict version has been in effect for the past few years, much to the delight of the outlawed Hizb ut-Tahrir, which has sought to organize underground Islamist cells in both Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

The adoption of *sharia* and other Islamic principles has been seen as a way of strengthening the legitimacy of existing institutions. The surveys reveal broad public support for this practice, especially in Tajikistan, but they also suggest the risk that small bands of extremists will seek to use *sharia* institutions and Islamic observances as vehicles for recruitment. In Dagestan, for example, participants in focus groups who were wary of Islamic fundamentalists said that *sharia* courts were “being exploited by radicals to impose their views.”

More generally, the danger in both the North Caucasus and Central Asia is that in the eyes of many young people, the incorporation of some Islamic principles into administrative and legal systems and the attempts to co-opt officially approved Islamic clerics have had the effect of discrediting more moderate Islamic groups and strengthening the allure of groups like Hizb ut-Tahrir. Because political disaffection among young people is so widespread (alarming so in the North Caucasus, according to the surveys), they tend to distrust anything that receives official approbation and to look favorably on anti-government movements and individuals who incur official hostility. Thus, even in the face of brutal repression, as in Uzbekistan and Dagestan, Islamic extremist groups have increasingly made inroads.

Conclusions

Several conclusions emerge from this analysis, none of which augur well for attempts to prevent violent instability. Political, economic, and social conditions in the North Caucasus and Central Asia – harsh and often indiscriminate police repression, pervasive corruption, persistently high levels of unemployment and underemployment, and widespread poverty – have fueled angry cynicism, especially among young people.

Official efforts to prevent Islamic groups from engaging in any form of political opposition have achieved short-term success, but surveys and focus groups indicate that the potential for young people to be attracted to radical Islamists remains high. In Ingushetia and Dagestan, in particular, many of the participants in focus groups believe that “our young people are drawn to Wahhabists for want of credible alternatives.” The granting of official approval to some moderate Islamic clerics, even as others are suppressed, has a tendency to discredit moderates and stoke greater interest in Islamic fundamentalist groups who promise to eliminate corruption, provide opportunities for economic advancement, and “restore integrity to political life.”

Several recent trends suggest that underground Islamic extremists are gaining strength in both the North Caucasus and Central Asia. These trends include the ongoing wave of terrorist attacks and violent turmoil in Ingushetia and Dagestan; the continued violence in Chechnya (still at high levels in some areas, despite the prolonged lull in the war); the spate of terrorist bombings in Tajikistan in 2007 and 2008; and the recent revelations of resurgent terrorist networks in Uzbekistan (networks whose existence came to light after the disruption of terrorist cells in Western Europe that had been smuggling weapons and money to Uzbek groups). Although the underground extremists may bide their time until more propitious circumstances come along for the launching of attacks, they are clearly making vigorous efforts to recruit disaffected young people. Even if the authorities in the North Caucasus and Central Asia are able to curb the growth of radical Islamic sentiment – something that is by no means guaranteed – the potential for Islamic extremists to provoke violence and even full-scale civil war in some areas will almost certainly increase.

PONARS Eurasia publications are funded through the International Program of Carnegie Corporation of New York. The views expressed in these publications are those of the author alone; publication does not imply endorsement by PONARS Eurasia, Georgetown University, or the Carnegie Corporation.

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