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Chechnya : moving toward Islamic nationalism?

by Pénélope Larzillière

Between the first Russo-Chechen war of independence (1994-96) and the resumption of the conflict in 1999, the range of actions employed by the Chechens evolved, as did the intensity of Russian army operations. While ambushes against the latter have remained the Chechen combatants' principal mode of action, recent developments in the conflict have been marked by the emergence of suicide attacks. The first war ended with the signing of the Khassaviurt accord in August 1996¹, following the serious setbacks experienced by the Russian army. A treaty was signed in 1997 prohibiting the use of force in relations between the two countries. However, the situation in an independent Chechnya turned out to be difficult. The shattered economy left between 80 and 90 % of the working population jobless². Russian promises of reconstruction in fact resulted in the economic isolation of Chechen territory through checkpoints set up all along the border. On the domestic scene, elections were organised in 1997. The candidates who were the most intransigent towards the Russians, and who had Islamist leanings, such as Basayev³ and Udugov (Minister of Information under President Dudayev), were outnumbered by Maskhadov, the head of the Chechen army known for his willingness to compromise and negotiate with the Russians. Yet Maskhadov had great difficulty in establishing his authority over the whole of Chechnya, with certain warlords refusing to retreat. In October 1999, Dagestani and Chechen Islamist combatants, led by Basayev, made an incursion into Dagestan in order to provide assistance to Wahhabi villages. In doing so, they gave the Russians an excuse to invade Chechnya again.

On the Russian side, the second war was marked by far more extensive bombings, village "sweeps", the establishment of "filtration camps", ransom-

1. Although the Chechen side understood the agreement as a recognition of its independence, the determination of Chechnya's status was postponed until 2001.

2. Brian Williams, "Caucasus Belli. The second Russo-Chechen war, 1999-2002. A struggle for freedom or sub-plot to the war on terrorism ?", *Turkistan Newsletter*, 2003.

3. A nationalist combatant during the first war, Basayev gradually developed an increasingly Islamist perspective, describing himself as an "Islamist Che Guevara".

taking, etc. In addition to traditional guerrilla methods, in 2000 the Chechens began launching suicide attacks against the Russian army, as well as against the pro-Russian Chechen administration, for which Basayev generally claimed responsibility. The suicide attacks were strongly influenced by the idea of *shahid*, or Islamic “martyr”. Websites for many jihadist organizations readily portrayed Chechnya as one of the fronts where Muslims were being oppressed by *kuffar*, or “infidels”, in this case Russians. The Russians immediately highlighted this state of affairs and made a direct link between such actions and Al Qaida-style international terrorism. The suicide attacks, rejected by the people, were then presented as the result of foreign influence, i.e. the “Wahhabis”. Thus arose the issue of the “Palestinization” of the conflict, officially referred to for the first time in June 2003 by FSB (ex-KGB) director Nikolai Patrushev, as well as by certain journalists such as Anna Politovskaia⁴. But does the increase in suicide attacks in Chechnya mean the Chechen struggle has been co-opted by international jihadist movements? The theory we will develop here attempts to highlight the evolution of that struggle from nationalism to Islamic nationalism, as the discourse justifying the war is increasingly filled with religious references, while the issues at stake have remained nationalist. Such references are also historical, as they were already present during the anti-colonial struggles in the 19th century. Moreover, although the use of suicide attacks is part of the evolution towards Islamic nationalism, this increase in sacrificial violence cannot be attributed to the Islamists alone. Indeed, the latter were very present during the first Chechen war when such actions were not employed. Other aspects must therefore be included in order to understand this change. We must be careful in our analysis in any case, as the inaccessible terrain makes it difficult to evaluate the real impact of references to martyrdom on the population and groups of combatants.

Islamism, an Islamic nationalist reinterpretation of the national struggle?

Although Islam has been present in the region since the 8th century, it was not massively established in Chechnya until the 18th, and was implanted, in the 19th century during the Caucasus wars⁵. The relationship between Chechen Islam and the anti-colonial wars constitutes an important point in understanding how the Chechen nationalist struggle was to be linked to Islam later on. That

4. Note that while Palestine also appears as a front for *jihād* on jihadist websites, the reference to martyrdom that one can observe in Palestine itself has little to do with the martyrdom of transnational *jihād*, as it exists within the context of Islamic nationalism: Pénélope Larzillière, ‘Palestinian ‘martyrdom’, the new face of failed nationalism’, in Alain Dieckhoff and Rémy Leveau (dir.), *Israéliens et Palestiniens, la guerre en partage*, Paris, Balland, 2003, pp. 89-116. As shown by Khosrokhavar, although suicide bombings are within the range of actions taken by Islamic nationalists and international jihadists, their frames of reference for justifying such actions are different: nationalism regarded as sacred in one case, and the transnational *umma* (community) of believers in the other (Farhad Khosrokhavar, *Les Nouveaux Martyrs d’Allah*, Paris, Flammarion, 2002).

5. See Mikhaïl Roshin, ‘Islam in Chechnya’, in Frédérique Longuet-Marx (dir.), *Tchéchénie, la guerre jusqu’au dernier*, Paris, Mille et Une Nuits, 2003, p. 118.

form of Islam was rooted in two Sufi brotherhoods: the Naqshbandiyya and the Qadiriyya. Every Chechen is associated with one of the branches of these brotherhoods, and members of the same clan may belong to different ones. These brotherhoods are also a form of social organization. Nevertheless, they lost a great deal of influence during the Soviet era, when Chechen society took part in the overall movement towards secularization. Chechen Islam, many of whose leaders disappeared, in particular during the deportation in 1944⁶, gave up many of its political aspects at that time and was transformed through an emphasis on Sufi rituals and traditions such as festivals, zikr⁷, etc. Respecting those rituals during the deportation played a major role in maintaining Chechen identity.

In addition to the emergence of jihadists⁸ in the Russo-Chechen conflict, which we will examine later on, one issue of great importance involves the response to Salafist religious and political ideas, in direct opposition to local Sufism. Two aspects played a crucial role: a generational conflict on the one hand, and a connection to the national struggle on the other⁹.

The generational conflict

Claiming a connection to Wahhabism has enabled young people to challenge clan-based decision-making structures. Through such references young people have succeeded in legitimizing their decision-making capacity. Within the Palestinian context, Islamism has challenged patriarchal authority by referring to a higher source of legitimacy and by establishing a direct reference to the Koran (in essence, playing the Koran off their fathers). Similarly Wahhabism, by challenging Sufism and especially social structures connected to it, has provided an opportunity for young people¹⁰. It has highlighted a direct connection to God, without any intermediary religious authorities, and built a religious relationship which can take on a more individualistic side in certain contexts, beyond the highly prescriptive rules of that movement and its organization in more or less closed groups. Thus the Wahhabis have often found themselves in direct opposition to village councils. Furthermore, this new religious reference has gone hand-in-hand with the creation of armed groups, which has enabled them to impose their decisions through the use of

6. On 23 February 1944, Stalin deported the Chechens to Kazakhstan, accusing them of collaborating with the Nazis. The memory of that deportation has remained central to the Chechens.

7. A group dance accompanied by prayers and songs.

8. By the term ‘‘jihadist’’ we are referring to international Islamist groups supporting the Salafist doctrine and associating it with jihadism. By ‘‘Wahhabis’’ we mean local Islamist groups supporting Salafism.

9. In this regard it could prove interesting to compare it to the role played by political Palestinian Islam as seen in movements such as Hamas. Indeed, the identity issue serves the same function here of reinterpreting the national struggle and of challenging community decision-making structures.

10. Chechen Committee, *Tchéchénie, dix clés pour comprendre*, Paris, La Découverte, 2003, p. 37.

force. Lastly, in a devastated economy, these groups have provided a great deal of financial assistance.

Social advancement has been possible within these movements through knowledge about Islam. Chechen Sufism has suffered from its failure to transmit such knowledge. Thus, in particular since the institution of *Sharia*, individuals with expertise on the subject of Islam – acquired over a few years through *ad hoc* training in Arab countries, including a certain familiarity with the language of the Koran – can attain positions upon their return that were previously unthinkable (president of a court, for instance). However, for the time being we lack sufficient information about the sociological profiles of those supporting Wahhabism.

The challenge to the established order has therefore come about through the use of weapons, but also through this reference to knowledge, even if the latter is marked by intense ideology.

The relationship to the national struggle

A new interpretation of the national struggle has also been facilitated by the reference to Islamism. Indeed, during the second Russo-Chechen War some of the Sufi authorities – in particular Kadyrov, a former mufti and combatant – were gradually discredited as the war progressed and repression by the Russians got worse, since they had collaborated with the latter. Although the administration has altered certain attitudes since then, it has continued to apply pro-Russian policies.

On the opposite side, combatant groups such as those led by Basayev have linked Islamism to the national struggle and referred to the figure of the Imam Shamil. The latter, who belonged to the Naqshbandi brotherhood, founded an independent imamate in the 19th century uniting Chechnya and Dagestan where he established the *Sharia*. He was defeated and deposed by the Russians in 1859.

The rooting of Islam within the national struggle has also been achieved through the notions of *ghazavat* and *jihad*. While *jihad* refers to “the believer’s efforts to improve himself” (major or inner *jihad*), or to the “holy war carried out to defend Muslims and their lands” (minor or outer *jihad*), *ghazavat* specifically designates combat between armies¹¹. It was first used in reference to the 19th century Caucasus Wars, and later during the first Russo-Chechen war.

The notion of *jihad* developed here is thus closely tied to references to independence and has only acquired real meaning for certain Chechen combatants within the context of the national struggle. In that sense one may speak of Chechen Islamic nationalism. By referring back to a past involving Islamism and the independence movement, Chechen Islamists are adapting jihadist Islamism to new territory. The creation of an Islamist state could then

11. Alfred Morabia, *Le Jihad dans l’islam médiéval*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1993, pp. 96 and 110.

appear to be an objective which, by reinforcing Chechen society, will also promote its autonomy.

In the same way that the idea of *jihad* developed by Palestinian Islamists suggests not so much a religious agenda as a way of incorporating the national struggle into a religious eschatology – the main objective remaining the territory's independence –, it seems that for the Chechens this notion should be interpreted more in the context of the past and its glorification. Furthermore, the inclusion of the national struggle within this set of references links this specific form of resistance to other examples of resistance through a criss-crossing chain of identification which has helped Chechnya break out of its isolation, both symbolically and in its attempts to raise funds.

The limited impact of internationalist jihadist groups

For certain – mainly Arab – international jihadist groups, Chechnya is a substitute for Afghanistan. The ideology developed by such groups has turned the Russo-Chechen conflict, like Palestine, into a zone of opposition between oppressed Muslims and infidels. However, they remain very limited in number in relation to the entire Chechen resistance movement; and while their propaganda routinely refers to Chechnya, it is mainly aimed at an Arab Muslim public. The extent of their impact has depended on links to local combatant groups and on territorializing their references, in other words on how well they adapt to what is at stake locally.

The impact and tactics of armed Wahhabi groups in Chechnya

The first jihadist groups arrived in Chechnya during the first war between 1994 and 1996. Before their arrival, the neo-fundamentalist Wahhabi doctrine had spread in Dagestan under the influence of a Dagestani preacher named Kebedov¹². Dagestani villages had turned Wahhabi and adopted the *Sharia*. The term Wahhabi, referring to Wahhabism¹³, a highly conservative form of Sunnism and the official religious doctrine of Saudi Arabia, is often rejected by such individuals themselves, who see it as an oversimplification of their doctrine and too specific a link with Saudi Arabia. The term Salafist is generally used by jihadist groups, although it is not certain that this is widespread in Chechnya. Salafism is an idea that was created in the late 19th century. The term itself comes from *salaf* (“pious ancestor”) and the trend grew out of a desire to return to a purer form of Islam by referring directly to the original texts and by adopting the same lifestyle as the prophet. This

12. Mikhaïl Roshin, chapter cited, p. 138.

13. Wahhabism grew out of an alliance between a tribal clan, the Saudis, and a religious reformer, Abdul Wahhab (1703-1792). See Olivier Roy, *L'Islam mondialisé*, Paris, Le Seuil, 2002, p. 136.

“return” had a political dimension through its resolve to challenge colonialism¹⁴. Political positions within the Salafist movement are extremely varied, with the jihadist faction merely one of its more extreme forms¹⁵.

Theories attempting to explain how such doctrines took root usually highlight the usefulness of a form of identification allowing for differentiation from and opposition to the Russians in the post-Soviet context. With respect to Chechnya, there are two different dimensions through which these groups have taken a position in local conflicts and thereby gained an impact – through their contribution to the national struggle and their challenging of traditional structures in organizations they were representing.

Integration in the struggle against the Russians

Indeed, these combatants perceived above all as foreign extremists by the Chechens, were not at all well liked at first. Nevertheless, their alliances with Chechen warlords, the most famous being the one sealed between Basayev and Khattab, a Saudi Arabian Wahabbi and former combatant in Afghanistan, have afforded them a certain measure of integration. This alliance clearly shows their determination to join together with effective groups and to obtain outside financing. As for Khattab, this local “sponsorship” was essential for him because the involvement of his combatants was not well accepted by the population. However, his success against the Russians in the field strengthened the position of his jihadists, and from that time on certain Chechen combatants began making Islamist references. Subsequently, their successes were widely broadcast through videotapes. During the first war, Basayev’s most famous military exploit was the February 1995 hostage-taking following a sortie which aimed to break through the Russian army encircling the Chechens and advance two hundred kilometres to the north of Chechnya. During negotiations the Russian Prime Minister Chernomyrdin announced the end of Russian operations. Although the ceasefire did not hold, it gave the Chechen resistance time to take in the new combatants from the villages destroyed by the Russian army. That type of operation gave particular visibility to this group of combatants, who nevertheless constituted a minority among the Chechen troops led by Maskhadov. They are estimated to have been three or four thousand in number during this period.

Thus the Wahhabis firmly established themselves through their military successes, and their Islamist discourse was only meaningful in reference to the struggle. For a Chechen combatant, choosing an armed group was more a function of proximity and renown than of ideological orientation. Their relationship to religious practices fluctuated¹⁶. And the opposition between Sufism and Salafism, which was nevertheless one of the things at stake for foreign combatant groups, held little meaning for the young people who joined

14. Olivier Roy, *op. cit.*, p. 133.

15. On this point, Olivier Roy, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

16. Chechnya Committee, *op. cit.*, p. 36 and Christoph Zuercher, *Institutionen und organisierte Gewalt : Konflikt und Stabilitätsdynamiken im (post-)sowjetischen Kaukasus*, p. 36.

such groups and found themselves surrounded by Islamist references linked to the national struggle.

Challenging local authorities?

More or less united with the rest of the Chechen resistance during the first war, these Islamist combatant groups were involved in the extreme division of power in post-war Chechnya. Indeed, their position was threatened within Chechen society. The population favoured negotiating with the Russians and was eager to believe in the accords signed. As the Islamist's presence in the Chechen resistance was disproportionate to their real impact on the population, the end of the war signalled a loss of power for them. The desire to maintain their position manifested itself through two forms of opposition, on the one hand within the independence movement against Maskhadov, who vacillated between compromise and rejection, and on the other hand against the traditional authorities and the Sufi hierarchy. Their position here was not so much a specificity of the Chechen Islamist movements as a standard attitude of warlords eager to maintain their power by carving out fiefdoms - sometimes linked to the criminal world - within which they refused to obey the main authority, in this case Maskhadov. In parallel to that refusal, the Islamists also opposed the local Sufi authorities.

As for the authorities themselves, they struggled against the combatants, challenging the strength they derived from taking part in the war. They sought to keep them out of the villages to avoid Russian reprisals against civilians. In general they developed an attitude of compromise with the Russians rather than armed struggle, illustrated particularly well by the fate of Kadyrov, the former mufti who ran the pro-Russian Chechen administration from June 2000. In that sense, the authorities constitute a form of opposition to the Islamic nationalists. For the jihadists, there is the added desire to reform Sufi Islam, considered degenerate by comparison with a pure, original Islam. This opposition led to violent internal clashes in July 1998. Within this context, Maskhadov tried in vain to expel the Wahhabis from Chechnya. He obtained no assistance from the Russians.

The Chechen Islamists then proceeded to carry out what could be called both an ideological and a strategic U-turn by strengthening their alliance with the Dagestani Wahhabis. An Islamist congress of Dagestani and Chechen Islamists had been formed in 1997. In 1998 it created an armed division to be led by Basayev. Ideologically speaking, it manifested far greater determination to establish an imamate connected to Shamil. In strategic terms this alliance highlighted a desire for opposition, and clearly led the Islamists to overestimate their influence on the people. Furthermore, the ties between Dagestan and Chechnya prompted them to take into account other aspects at stake such as the conflict between the Wahhabis and the Dagestani government. In August 1999, several hundred combatants commanded by Basayev and Khattab entered Dagestan to 'liberate' it and help form an Islamic state united with Chechnya. But the Islamists greatly underestimated the people's opposition to their

movement and were faced with local resistance in addition to attacks by the Russian army.

That incident marked the most extreme point in the gap between the Islamists' ideas and the Chechen population. While striving to maintain their position, the Islamists were forced to take things even further. They had a double interest in the situation in Chechnya remaining unstable. First, their influence in the resistance movement – due to their considerable resources – gave them a more important role to play. Secondly, their ideology was only meaningful to people during times of conflict, particularly when conflict intensified and there appeared to be no other way of settling the situation.

Beyond their effective participation in armed groups, what was the Islamists' exact ideological posture?

Which ideological discourse?

One cannot talk about *one* Islamist discourse in Chechnya, since there are several of them dealing with different issues. Roughly, one could say that references to Islam in Chechnya are threefold: a traditional Sufi Islam which is also involved in the organization of society, an Islamic nationalism, and a jihadist Islamism backed by foreigners. The three discourses are different, as are the leaders of these three trends and their positions on the national struggle. However, these distinctions are not necessarily meaningful to their rank-and-file militants who shift from one to the other. Despite the use of the same vocabulary, a distinct gap is apparent between the discourse developed around Chechnya by the international jihadist movement and that of local Chechen Islamists found on the internet, on videotapes, in declarations made by their leaders, etc. Nonetheless, while one may jump from a territorialized discourse on independence to a de-territorialized discourse with jihadists, the one constant always advanced is the notion of “martyrdom” and the capacity for sacrifice.

For the jihadists, Chechnya has no regional or historical specificity and is merely a place illustrating the oppression of Muslims by *kuffar*. As in Palestine, it has been used *a-posteriori* to develop that theory and to legitimize their position by showing the struggle against the abuses of the Russian army in Chechnya. One can distinguish the “non-specialized” jihadist websites, in which Chechnya and Palestine constitute the central – but not the only – themes, from those specifically concerned with Chechnya.

In addition to the websites, Azzam, generally thought to be Al Qaida's publishing house, has brought out a CD-Rom on Chechnya in Arabic showing the wartime atrocities and Chechen ambushes against the Russians with a number of personal accounts and wills from *mujahidin*. Videotapes of ambushes led by Basayev and Khattab in Chechnya are also being circulated. This type of media is important because websites are often inaccessible.

In these documents, particularly in the wills of kamikazes and bequeathed videotapes¹⁷, the Russians are presented as *kuffar*. But the issue of Chechen independence is not the main theme. The videos, photographs and accounts stressing the horror of war, lingering over images of the dead and wounded, and showing the combatants in action are juxtaposed with verses from the Koran. Next to photographs of dead “martyrs” is the text: “Do not think that those killed on the path of Allah are dead. On the contrary, they are living with their God, very well provided for.” (Koran III, 169). Similarly, the wills stress the relationship to Allah and *jihad*, with no mention of the Chechen question.

Female martyrdom is featured on the website www.qoqaz.com. Piety and the *shahidats*’ capacity for sacrifice are highlighted: “I know what I’m doing, paradise has its price and I hope it will be the price of paradise. *Hawaa Barayev*, the sword of *jihad*.” A ten-page document explains the specific role women can play within the framework of *jihad*¹⁸. This glorification of women is always to the detriment of men who have not joined the fight: “A great many women are now taking part in *jihad* and I hope that the men will also participate in *jihad* and not take on the women’s role by staying at home.[...] Our ancestors would have killed anyone who tried to touch their wives, but Muslim women are now being attacked and raped in front of those who call themselves men, and they care so little about the honour of their Muslim sisters that they sit there drinking tea while listening to such appalling news”¹⁹.

In contrast to these general invocations, the documents shown on the *kavkazcenter* website run by the Chechen Udugov – who also has a television channel which he now runs from Qatar –, as well as those on “martyrdom operations”, are in Russian rather than Arabic; and their discourse is centred around the need to liberate Chechnya. This is the specific framework within which *jihad* is referred to. One example is this declaration made by the hostage-takers at a Moscow theatre²⁰, broadcast on *Al-Jazeera*: “We have come to the capital to end the war and attain martyrdom here through the path

17. To quote only a descriptive summary of certain videos in Arabic: *Chechnya, the destruction of a nation* (December 1999) shows attacks against civilians, the systematic destruction of non-military targets by Russian forces, and amputated young children and babies; *Massacre in Chechnya* (October 1999) shows massacres perpetrated against women and children by Russian forces; *Jihad in Dagestan* shows attacks by the *jihad* in August and September 1999, when Chechen *mujahidin* went to help their Muslim comrades in Dagestan.

18. To take part in combat if the local commander decides the struggle is such that women must participate, to support the combatants in the battlefield, to raise *mujahidin* children, to engage in physical training, to urge loved ones to take part in *jihad*, and to study military medical practices.

19. Excerpt from a text presenting itself as an English transcription of a video entitled *No Surrender !* It is a dialogue between two women, Hawwaa and Luiza, preparing to commit a suicide attack, and their instructor. The document, initially featured on the website www.qoqaz.com, can be found on www.terrorisme.net. This website, as well as www.religioscope.com, is run by Jean-François Mayer, a professor at the University of Fribourg.

20. On 23 October 2002 a Chechen commando took several hundred spectators hostage. Russian special forces stormed the building using paralysing gas. All members of the commando were killed, as were numerous hostages.

of Allah. We demand an end to the war and the withdrawal of Russian forces.[...] Every nation has a right to self-determination, but Russia has taken that right away from the Chechen people and today we want to take back that right granted us – and to all other nations – by Allah the Most Gracious, the right to freedom and self-determination. The Russian occupants have flooded our country with our children’s blood and we have waited a long time for a fair solution [by appealing to] human consciences, but the world is living in a coma and doesn’t care about the assassination of innocents.[...] That is why we have chosen this path – the path of *jihād* for the liberty of the Chechen people.”²¹.

There are two opposing discourses. On the one hand, de-territorialized jihadism, and on the other hand, ethnic nationalism evolving towards Islamic nationalism. The two kinds of discourse are not intended for the same audience. Jihadist sites broadcasting mainly in Arabic and English are mainly targeting an Arab-Muslim audience²². The same type of competition was found in Palestinian camps in Lebanon between Islamic nationalism – in movements such as Hamas or Islamic Jihad in this case – and the Salafists’ jihadist Islamism. When the mosques were taken over by Islamic nationalist movements such as Hamas, it was perceived as a way of preventing jihadist movements from taking root²³.

Although somewhat modified by Islamic nationalism, Chechen nationalism’s significant influence limits the extent to which jihadist ideology can take root in the country, even if some figures from this movement are present. Islamist ideas are only meaningful for them through an association with the national struggle and its reinterpretation.

An evolving range of actions and the increase in suicide bombings

Is the evolution towards Islamic nationalism a key element in understanding the adoption of a range of actions including suicide bombings? The latter use

21. A French translation of these declarations can be seen on www.terrorisme.net: *Prise d’otages à Moscou* (26 octobre 2002).

22. An example of the impact of this kind of discourse on Palestinian refugees in Lebanon in 1999, in the context of clashes with the Lebanese army, has been analysed by Bernard Rougier: “A sizeable part of this group became literally immersed in jihadist Islamism, identifying itself with the population of Grozny suffering daily bombings by Russian troops. The timing and the place for the fighting were synchronised with the destruction of Grozny by the Russian troops, and in the feverish minds of those following the fighting in Aïn el-Héloué, the struggle against the Lebanese army was indeed an extension of the Chechen *jihād* against the Russian army.” Bernard Rougier, *Reconstructions identitaires et mobilisations religieuses dans les camps de réfugiés palestiniens au Liban depuis la fin de la guerre (1990-2001)*, thesis, Paris, Institut d’études politiques, 2002, pp. 354-355. A young Palestinian from the camp even committed a suicide attack against the Russian Embassy in Beirut (Rougier, *ibid.*, pp. 355-360).

²³. Bernard Rougier, “Religious dynamics and national identity in Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon”, in Jean-Francois Legrain, (dir.), “Waiting for Palestine”, *Maghreb-Machreq*, n 176, September 2003.

the *shahid*, or Muslim martyr, as a reference, and in that respect the link might appear quite clear. Suicide bombings are more characteristic of the second war, particularly in 2003. From 2000 to 2003, the Russo-Chechen war was defined on the Russian side by an intensification of methods of massive repression²⁴ as well as widespread corruption. On the Chechen side, the resistance movement was divided. The people were at the end of their tether. The legitimacy of the pro-Russian administration, already very weak, was not strengthened by the March 2003 referendum, which was widely contested. Furthermore, the combatants clashed over which methods to employ. While ambushes and guerrilla warfare remained the main mode of action, bombings and suicide attacks increased despite Maskhadov's disavowal. Other kinds of operations associated with the idea of martyrdom had been carried out by the Chechens in the past. The main mode of action during the first war therefore consisted of ambushes against the Russian army. However, certain very highrisk attacks designed to help fighters break out of encirclement were presented as suicide attacks. Moreover, some combatants in Islamist battalions celebrated their funerals before going into combat²⁵. Nevertheless, it cannot be called suicide in a literal sense except when volunteers were sent over minefields, as in Iran²⁶, to allow the main combatants to get out of Grozny under siege. There, they were sure to die. In the two other cases, they used tactics aimed at turning apparently desperate situations around where there was still a chance for survival²⁷.

It seems impossible to establish a direct causal link between the increase in suicide bombings and the evolution towards Islamic nationalism, or at least to attribute full responsibility to Islamist organizations in Chechnya. Since the resumption of the conflict, responsibility for the bombings generally was claimed by Basayev until his death in July 2006.. But two types of operations must be distinguished. Some, like the taking of hostages at the Moscow theatre, require a great deal of organization, while others – isolated acts with simple targets – seem to be carried out by relatively unorganized individuals²⁸. It is unlikely, for example, that Basayev had any real hold over the latter. These acts

24. On 11 April 2003, *Le Monde* published an article concerning a report from pro-Russian Chechen authorities sent to “the highest level of State” (i.e. Vladimir Putin). This unpublished document mentioned among other things the execution of one hundred civilians per month throughout 2002, nearly three thousand corpses found in mass graves, kidnappings and torture. On 17 April, the Chechen Prime Minister, Anatoli Popov, declared that it was not a “secret report” but rather the results of an inquiry led by the Chechen state prosecutor Viktor Kravtchenko. According to him, the text actually mentions three hundred civilian kidnappings involving Russian soldiers, some of whom are already serving time.

25. Brian Williams, “Unraveling the links between the Middle East and Islamic militants in Chechnya”, *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, 12 February 2003, p. 2.

26. Farhad Khosrokhavar, *L'Islamisme et la Mort*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1995.

27. For Hamit Bozarslan, eliminating the idea of risk in suicide attacks, in which death is certain, is a crucial aspect in the development of sacrificial violence. Hamit Bozarslan, *From Political Contest to Self-Sacrifice: Violence in the Middle East*, Princeton, Markus Wiener Publishers, 2004.

28. Laurent Vinatier, “Prospective reflections on the political evolution of Chechnya”, Round table discussion on Chechnya, EHESS-IISMM, 5 May 2003.

are carried out by Chechens, and surely not by international jihadist militants. The first suicide attacks using truck bombs were perpetrated in July 2000; but the true intensification and exportation of this mode of action on Russian territory began in December 2002. Nonetheless, the Russian army in Chechnya and the pro-Russian Chechen administration were the targets of the majority of bomb attacks. This specificity highlights the extent to which Chechen society was divided. One of the bombings targeted Kadyrov, the head of the administration²⁹.

These diverse elements tend to reinforce the theory of local appropriation of acts such as suicide bombings, which indeed developed through the notion of sacrifice for the cause, and the *shahid*, but they cannot be considered as the result of indoctrination based on the person's isolation. Moreover, Chechens tend to distance themselves from the jihadist discourse and consider the Islamic nationalists' violence as a form of revenge, the weak man's weapon. The suicide attacks committed by women are associated with the idea of "sacrifice, not in the name of any doctrine, but as an act of revenge or a way of taking justice into one's own hands since one cannot count on the judicial system, nor on help from anyone. Isolation and abandonment by the international community are mentioned constantly."³⁰

The history of these women confirms this. People talk of "war widows", and there is always a deceased husband, brother or other relative to justify their desire for revenge. Although these women are increasingly religious, according to Bleuenn Isambard, "the young women who died at the Nord-Ost Theatre in Moscow in October 2002, and others who blew themselves up against Russian targets – or tried to, more or less successfully – were for the most part "modern", educated young women who did not belong to extremist movements. Some were clearly "manipulated" or used as tools, while others decided on their own and made the move alone, or nearly so.[...] Those who were willing to commit such deeds – and even the acts themselves – were appropriated after the fact. The willingness to commit such acts is therefore not the result of indoctrination, but clearly the person's own decision, which is subsequently reinforced and supported, at times by those around him/her, and through religious interpretations stressing the value of sacrifice. The main motivation seems linked on the one hand to a desire to avenge a close relative, and on the other hand to the general context of the situation in Chechnya which is perceived as devoid of hope.

There are some striking analogies here to the case of Palestine, where prospective suicide bombers for the second Intifada (contrary to those in 1994-1996), far from being seasoned militants from organizations, were recruited in a much more widespread fashion and often went to the organizations themselves when ready to take action. The same intensification of religious

29. The bomb attack on 14 May 2003 carried out during a religious celebration seemed to be targeting Ahmed Kadyrov. There were fifteen deaths and one hundred and forty wounded. Sources disagree about whether it was a suicide attack by one or two women, or a bomb which had been placed inside a loudspeaker.

30. Interview with Bleuenn Isambard upon his return from Chechnya in the summer of 2003.

practices took place a few weeks prior to the event. But, contrary to what has occurred in other contexts, the organization did not have to isolate the individuals, who continued to live in their everyday environment up to the last day. As in the case of Chechnya, the suicide bombers in Israel are not recruited from a specific environment, and definitely not from a particularly poor or underprivileged one by the standards of the society as a whole. The Chechen and Palestinian cases are indeed similar, as they both contain broad social breeding-grounds which have been more or less exploited by these organizations, although not created by them. Despair resulting from international indifference must be taken into account as one source for such breeding-grounds.

In parallel with the increase in suicide bombings in Chechnya, the use of religious vocabulary has become more pronounced in talking about the conflict, along with the highlighting of combatants' religious practices – beginning with the “martyrdom” of the suicide bombings. But this does not necessarily reflect any influence from international jihadism. First, one must underline the heritage of past struggles dating back to the 19th century, when Islam was closely tied to anti-colonialism. The use of references from international jihadism indicating Chechnya to be a hotbed of *ofkuffar* oppression of Muslims is only meaningful if associated with the plan for national liberation in Chechnya. The Islamists' main impact has been through their battalions' exploits, and through a subsequent association – for the time being – with a heroic (but also extremist) image. Conversely, their attempts to change values within Chechen society and their opposition to traditional structures have alienated a segment of the population. However, this may also afford them some credibility with the younger generation, to whom they represent a chance for social advancement and greater power.

Although the reference to martyrdom provides a framework for legitimizing suicide bombings, these mainly grow out of a desire for revenge, of a personal nature in most cases – suicide attacks against the general who killed one's brother, for example –, and as such could potentially find wider support among the Chechen population. That same aspect of revenge – a list of names could be mentioned in a will – is present in Palestinian kamikazes; but injecting the notion of an eschatological *jihad* adds a temporal dimension which allows the lost national struggle to be recast with very long-term prospects for victory. That aspect seems to be missing from the Chechen equation, perhaps which perhaps confirms a weaker ideological link between suicide attacks and the Islamic nationalist reinterpretation of the struggle³¹.

31. It would have been impossible to write this chapter without the conversations I had with Bleuenn Isambard, Uwe Halbach, Anne Le Huérou, Aude Merlin, Frédérique Longuet-Marx, Silvia Serrano, Mairbek Vatchagaev and Laurent Vinatier, to whom I would like to extend my thanks.

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