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# **Beslan**

Analysis of Terrorist Objectives  
And  
The Al Qaeda Connection

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**CENTER FOR POLICING TERRORISM  
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## Background

Those who argue that what is happening in Chechnya is largely the result of the Russian military presence there, misdiagnose the fundamental problems plaguing the region. While Russian imperialism is a contributing factor, the more problematic issues are related to the parasites that have attached themselves to Chechnya.<sup>1</sup> These include international terrorist organizations, Wahhabi theocrats, drug cartels, other criminal organizations, and generous private funding originating from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States.

After the Russians failed to bring the rebellious republic back into the fold during the first Chechen war, the Russians more or less surrendered politically, thus creating a de facto independent State. This approach failed to bring peace to the region, but rather provided a safe haven for a number of unsavory groups. Gulf money helped the Wahhabis to finalize control over Chechnya's institutional infrastructure and led to calls for the imposition of *sha'riah*, even though most Chechens (and Caucasus Muslims in general) are Sufis.<sup>2</sup>

Amir ibn al-Khattab, a Saudi national and bin Laden protege, led the al Qaeda effort in Chechnya.<sup>3</sup> Al-Khattab previously assisted Islamic fighters in the Tajik Civil War and the Armenia-Azerbaijan War over Nagorno-Karabakh.<sup>4, 5</sup> In 1999, Khattab and his "Islamic International Brigade" used Chechnya as a base from which to invade the neighboring Russian republic of Dagestan as part of a long-term al-Qaeda strategy to export the Chechen political culture to the rest of the Caucasus.<sup>6</sup> That failed invasion of Dagestan marks the proper beginning of the current fighting in Chechnya.

Originally, the Chechen command structure was fairly solid and made up of both secular nationalists led by President Aslan Maskhadov and Wahhabi extremists led by Shamil Basayev. Basayev, the former Chechen prime minister, trained in Afghanistan's terrorist camps, served as Khattab's superior, and fought alongside him in Nagorno-Karabakh.<sup>7</sup> However, since the fall of Grozny in 2002, the Chechen Wahhabi fighters under Basayev have increasingly been in ascendance and are set up along the following lines:

- **United Force of Caucasian Mujahideen:** The Russians refer to this group as the Supreme Military Majlis ul-Shura of the Mujahideen Forces of Caucasus. It is the coordinating organization under which all of the Chechen Wahhabi groups operate and is headed by Shamil Basayev. It also includes the Chechen *sha'riah* court, which provides theological rationales for activities such as the Beslan attack.<sup>8</sup>
- **Islamic International Brigade (IIB):** Commanded first by Khattab and then his late successor Abu Walid al-Ghamdi (a relative of 3 of the 9/11 hijackers<sup>9</sup>), the IIB is also known as the "Arab brigade" or the al-Ansar Mujahideen due to the high percentage of Arab al-Qaeda fighters in its ranks.<sup>10</sup> While other Chechen groups contain al-Qaeda members serving either as "officers" or in some kind of a military advisor capacity, the IIB is unquestionably the hub of the al-Qaeda presence in Chechnya.<sup>11</sup>
- **Special Purpose Islamic Regiment: (SPIR)** Also known as the al-Jihad Fisi Sabillah Special Islamic Regiment and formerly commanded by the late Ruslan Gelayev<sup>12</sup> (killed in early 2004), SPIR engages primarily in guerrilla attacks against Russian

forces as well as the execution of those Chechens deemed to be collaborators.<sup>13</sup> It also contains a fair number of Turkish jihadis in its ranks.<sup>14</sup>

- **Riyadus Salikhin:** This is a Romanization of the Russified form of *Riyadh al-Saliheen* or Garden of the Righteous, which comes from Islamic descriptions of Paradise. This is basically the Chechen equivalent to the Tamil Tigers' Black Tigers suicide bombing squad and essentially performs the same duties for the Chechen Wahhabis. It first came into existence in June 2000 when two suicide bombers blew up a truck loaded with explosives at a checkpoint near a Russian OMON (Special Forces) unit at Alkhan-Yurt in Chechnya.<sup>15</sup>
- **Islamic Army of Dagestan:** The name given to the Karamakhi-based Dagestanis recruited by Khattab that helped him to foment his 1999 invasion of Dagestan.<sup>16</sup>
- **Military Council Majlis al-Shura of Ingushetia:** The name given to the Ingush Wahhabis who fought alongside the United Forces during the June 2004 raid into Ingushetia. Abu Kutayba, a Saudi national, leads this group.<sup>17</sup>
- **Urus-Martan Front:** A small Ingush group led by Akhmed Basnukayev that was fighting for greater autonomy in the Urus-Martan and Achkoi-Martan districts of Chechnya before it was absorbed into the framework of Basayev's United Force.<sup>18</sup>

### **Basayev's Terror Offensive**

Since August 21st, Russia has been subject to a wave of Chechen terrorist attacks masterminded by Basayev and bankrolled by al-Qaeda through an Arab national named Abu Omar al-Saif, who serves as the network's paymaster in the Caucasus.<sup>19, 20</sup> While the European and Pakistani arrests of numerous mid-level al-Qaeda figures over the summer appear at least on the surface to have disrupted the network's plans for attacks inside Pakistan (and hopefully the continental United States), no similar pattern of disruption appears to have occurred in Iraq or the Caucasus.

The following is a basic chronology of Chechen attacks prior to Beslan:

- From August 21-22, upwards of 60 Russian and Chechen-backed troops were slaughtered in and around the Russian-controlled Chechen capital of Grozny. These attacks utilized the same tactics as the June 22nd raid by hundreds of Chechen and Ingush jihadis of the Ingush capital Nazran and nearby cities of Karabulak and Sleptsovsk.<sup>21</sup> In contrast to the tactics employed by Sadr's Mahdi Army (which attempted to take and hold territory), during the June attacks, Basayev's fighters took what they needed from the Russian armories and banks and left the town before Russian reinforcements could arrive.
- On August 24th, two females, who were apparently members of Riyadus Salikhin, bombed separate planes while in flight.
- On August 31st, a double suicide bombing in Moscow killed 10, also perpetrated by members of Riyadus Salikhin.

## Why North Ossetia

Basayev's reasons for selecting North Ossetia in general, and Beslan in particular, seem obvious upon careful consideration of the situation.

Unlike most of the North Caucasus, North Ossetians are primarily Eastern Orthodox Christians. To a Wahhabi who subscribes to bin Laden's belief in a Huntingtonian-esque clash of civilizations, it "makes sense" to target North Ossetians, rather than say Russian Muslim schoolchildren in Ingushetia or Dagestan. In addition to being majority Christian, North Ossetia was also one of the few regions of the North Caucasus that voluntarily joined the Russian Empire, and its population formed a lot of the levies that were eventually used to subdue other Caucasus nations that refused to submit to the Tsar. As such, even the murder of innocent schoolchildren can be fit into a warped idea of "vengeance" for historical events.

Regardless of what one thinks about Russian involvement in Chechnya, the people of Beslan had no power whatsoever to effect Russian policy in region. Basayev is an educated man who is quite familiar with the North Caucasus, so he must have known this when he was planning the attack. Things like this make his decision to target the innocent people of Beslan all that much more inexcusable.

Basayev's ambitions apparently extend far beyond just Chechen independence. Those who argue that a political solution or Russian withdrawal from the region would resolve the matter would be sorely disappointed if their reasoning were adopted as Russian policy. One need go no farther than the terrorists' proclamations to understand this. Amir Ramzan, one of Basayev's subordinates, stated the following in an interview with the Chechen propaganda website *Kavkaz Center* last year:

Q: From your words I can assume that you operate not only in Chechnya but all over the North Caucasus.

R: Yes, very much so. Not only we carry out raids to various areas in the Caucasus, but we also form local Jama'ats, militant sabotage groups locally. We are joined by a lot of Kabardinians, Dagestanis, Karachaevans, Ingushetians and even Ossetians (Muslims).

Q: That means that those in Russia who say that you want to create a caliphate in the Caucasus from sea to sea, are right?

R: Yes, it is so. Since they are unwilling to negotiate with us, then we'll be doing what we can. And there is a lot we can do. Next year the war will seize the entire Caucasus from the Caspian Sea to the Black Sea. Apart from Ossetia and Ingushetia, this year another guerrilla war has already started in two areas of Dagestan bordering Chechnya. I swear by Allah, this is only the beginning. Russian authorities are well aware of this and this is why they are trying to organize formations of the local residents in the area who could resist us effectively. Similar process is taking place in Chechnya. But it will come to absolutely nothing. Having reached a certain level of confrontation inside Chechnya, Russia will sooner or later have to withdraw its troops

beyond the Terek River, for instance. In that case we will need no more than two weeks to destroy all the pro-Russian puppet formations.<sup>22</sup>

Note that his reference to negotiations refers to the establishment of a caliphate from the Black Sea to the Caspian, *not* to Russian withdrawal from Chechnya. So unless one wants Putin to consider placing millions of people in the hands of the unstable, there is really very little for him to negotiate with Basayev about. Maskhadov is another matter entirely. The Russians might do well to obtain a political settlement on that end, as he has indicated that he might be open to such a thing.

### **Links to al-Qaeda**

It seems that the only difference between al-Qaeda and Basayev's Chechen Killer Korps is one of semantics; especially when one considers the prominence of people like bin Laden's protege Khattab or Abu Walid al-Ghamdi within the hierarchy of the Chechen forces loyal to Basayev. Consider the following:

- Khattab first met bin Laden during the Afghan War and later served as the leader of an al-Qaeda brigade sent to assist first the Tajik Islamists in the Tajik Civil War and later the Azeri military during the Armenia-Azerbaijan War in the early 1990s.<sup>23</sup>
- Ties between al-Qaeda and a number of other Chechen leaders go at least as far back as the early 1990s.<sup>24</sup>
- Basayev first met with Khattab while fighting in Nagorno-Karabakh and then traveled to Afghanistan to receive al-Qaeda training along with several hundred fellow Chechens.<sup>25</sup>
- By August 1995, a large number of Basayev's followers were Afghan-trained Chechen or Arab fighters.<sup>26</sup>
- Several hundred additional Chechens trained in Afghanistan during the republic's period of *de facto* independence from Russia. A number of elite Chechen fighters became members of bin Laden's personal guard.<sup>27</sup>
- Former Chechen president Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev convinced Mullah Omar to recognize Chechnya as an independent state and allow it to set up offices in Kabul and Kandahar.<sup>28</sup>
- Basayev and Khattab sent emissaries to Afghanistan in 1999. They met with bin Laden in Kandahar and returned with several hundred members of al-Qaeda's elite Brigade 055, as well as a large amount of cash to help bankroll the invasion of Dagestan.<sup>29</sup> Bin Laden later sent Khattab an additional \$30,000,000, funneled through the International Islamic Relief Organization and Global Relief NGOs based in Georgia.<sup>30</sup>
- As the fighting intensified in late 1999, bin Laden sent large amounts of money and weapons to Basayev, Khattab, and Arbi Barayev and appointed Abu Tariq to oversee

the distribution of al-Qaeda funds in Chechnya.<sup>31</sup> Abu Tariq was killed in December 2002 and succeeded by Abu Omar al-Saif, another Arab national.

- Chechen commanders loyal to Basayev used al-Qaeda funding to recruit fighters from Georgia, Ingushetia, South Ossetia, Azerbaijan, and Dagestan.<sup>32</sup>
- The last contingent of Chechen trainees, who arrived in Afghanistan in the spring of 2001, fought against the US-backed Northern Alliance at Mazar-e-Sharif and Kunduz during Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF).<sup>33</sup>
- After 9/11, Khattab sent a token force of Chechen and Arab fighters to Afghanistan to demonstrate his solidarity with bin Laden, as well as recognition of him as the undisputed leader of the international Islamist movement.<sup>34</sup>
- Russian reports indicate that Abu Omar al-Saif bankrolled this most recent attack, and that Arabs were found among the bodies of the Beslan hostage-takers.<sup>35</sup>

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> This should in no way be seen as an endorsement of Russian policies in Chechnya, which have been worse than brutal - and simply ineffective.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.cdi.org/terrorism/spir.cfm>. See also, [http://www.naqshbandi.net/haqqani/Islam/Shariah/muamalaat/jihad/roots\\_of\\_conflict.htm](http://www.naqshbandi.net/haqqani/Islam/Shariah/muamalaat/jihad/roots_of_conflict.htm); a 1975 Soviet survey claimed that over half the Chechen population belonged to local Sufi orders.

<sup>3</sup> Gunaratna, Rohan, *Inside Al Qaeda: Global Network of Terror*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2002, p. 68.

<sup>4</sup> Gunaratna, Rohan, *Inside Al Qaeda: Global Network of Terror*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2002, pp. 134-135.

<sup>5</sup> Shermatova, Sanobar, "Khattab and Central Asia," *Moscow News*, September 13, 2000. It should be noted that the Azeri Ministry of Defense officially denies that Khattab took part in the fighting over Nagorno-Karabakh.

<sup>6</sup> LaFraniere, Sharon, "How Jihad Made Its Way to Chechnya," *Washington Post*, April 26, 2003.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.cdi.org/russia/242-10.cfm>; the United Force is referred to by the Russian press as the name of the group's leadership, the Supreme Military Mejlis-ul-Shura (*majlis al-shura* or consultative council).

<sup>9</sup> Ahmed and Hamza al-Ghamdi (Alghamdi) of United Airlines Flight 175 and Saeed al-Ghamdi of United Airlines Flight 93.

<sup>10</sup> Gunaratna, Rohan, *Inside Al Qaeda: Global Network of Terror*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2002, p. 135.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.cdi.org/russia/242-10.cfm>; Khamzat is Gelayev's *kuniyat* or assumed name.

<sup>13</sup> Tyler, Patrick E., "In Caucasus Gorge, a Haven for Muslim Militants," *New York Times*, February 28, 2002. See also, <http://www.fas.org/irp/world/para/spir.htm>

<sup>14</sup> Hacaoglu, Selcan, "AP Enterprise: Turkish warrior tells of Turks in the ranks of al-Qaida," November 26, 2003.

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.ict.org.il/articles/articledet.cfm?articleid=113>. It should be noted that suicide bombing is not an indigenous Chechen tradition, but rather a Middle East import. The Chechen *sha'riah* court has appropriated the concept of *smertnitsi* (the idea of virtuous warriors willing to sacrifice their own lives in defense of others) in its theological justifications. In most cases, members of *Riyadus Salikhin* are the widows of dead Chechen jihadis.

<sup>16</sup> LaFraniere, Sharon, "How Jihad Made Its Way to Chechnya," *Washington Post*, April 26, 2003.

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/eng/article.php?id=2977>

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<sup>18</sup> Sobetski, Yevgeni, "Murderer of 30 people killed in Ingushetia," ITAR-TASS News Agency, March 4, 2004.

<sup>19</sup> Murphy, Kim, "War's web traps 'Black Widows,'" Daily Press, February 9, 2004.

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Page=subjects&Area=jihad&ID=SP63503>

<sup>21</sup> Over 100 Ingush were killed during that raid, including the republic's interior minister, as Basyev's fighters more or less sacked the 3 cities. The raid indicates just how confident Basayev was, since he devoted a large percentage of his forces to the operation.

<sup>22</sup> <http://kavkazcenter.com/eng/article.php?id=2039>

<sup>23</sup> Shermatova, Sanobar, "Khattab and Central Asia," *Moscow News*, September 13, 2000. See also, Gunaratna, Rohan, *Inside Al Qaeda: Global Network of Terror*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2002, p. 135.

<sup>24</sup> Gunaratna, Rohan, *Inside Al Qaeda: Global Network of Terror*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2002, pp. 134-135. Ties between Basayev and Khattab go back at least as far as 1994 and the end of the fighting in Nagorno-Karabakh.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. See also, Chivers, C.J., "The Chechen's Story: From Unrivaled Guerrilla Leader to the Terror of Russia," *New York Times*, September 15, 2004.

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.cdi.org/terrorism/spir.cfm>

<sup>27</sup> Gunaratna, Rohan, *Inside Al Qaeda: Global Network of Terror*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2002, p. 135. See also, Petrou, Michael, "Surrender talks fall apart again: Rumours persist bin Laden has fled to Pakistan," *Ottawa Citizen*, December 13, 2001.

<sup>28</sup>

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2004/02/14/db1403.xml&sSheet=/portal/2004/02/14/ixportal.html>

<sup>29</sup> <http://www.cnn.com/2003/US/South/08/08/us.chechnya.terrorist/>

<sup>30</sup> Gunaratna, Rohan, *Inside Al Qaeda: Global Network of Terror*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2002, p. 68 and 135, though it is prudent to note that the largest single sum, \$25,000,000, is coming from Russian sources and cannot be independently confirmed.

<sup>31</sup> <http://www.cnn.com/2003/US/South/08/08/us.chechnya.terrorist/>. See also, LaFraniere, Sharon, "Chechen Bombers Linked to Arab Terrorists; Russian Official Cites Separatists' Use of 'Foreign Mercenaries; in Attacks,'" *Washington Post*, December 29, 2002.

<sup>32</sup> Gunaratna, Rohan, *Inside Al Qaeda: Global Network of Terror*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2002, p. 135.

<sup>33</sup> <http://www.saag.org/papers11/paper1036.html>

<sup>34</sup> Otton, Chris, "Americans hunt for Chechens in Afghanistan," Agence France-Presse, March 22, 2002.

<sup>35</sup> "Al-Qaeda may have financed Russian school raid," Reuters, September 3, 2004. See also,

<http://www.cnn.com/2004/WORLD/europe/09/07/putin.us/>