De-Chechenising the II Caucasus Emirate: From Ethnonational Secessionism to Ethnoreligious Irredentism

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On 18th March 2014, Aliasaskhab Kebekov confirmed the death of Dokka Umarov, leader of the II Caucasus Emirate established by him in the end of October 2007. In the same video Kebekov claims that he was appointed to be the new leader of the irredentist group that aims to establish an Emirate uniting the North Caucasus under the Sharia law. The nomination of Kebekov opens a new chapter in the transformation of the movement from an ethnonational secessionist group to an ethnoreligious irredentist project.

From the end of the II Russo-Chechen War to October 2007

The beginning of the new millennium brought an end to the Second Russo-Chechen War. The conflict started in the end of August 1999 and endured until May 2000 with the Russians claiming victory and establishing a loyalist regime on the ground. The victory of Russia nullified the Khasavyourt Agreement signed in August 1996 and the Russian-Chechen Peace Treaty signed in Moscow in May 1997, between Mashkadov (president of Chechnya) and Yeltsin (president of the Russian Federation).

The end of the Second Chechen War did not just nullified Agreements and Peace Treaties it also produced a rift amongst the leaders of the secessionist movement. On one side, the moderate faction that still aims to establish the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria and that believes in the implementation of the Khasavyourt Agreement as a tool to begin the rapprochement with the Russian Federation.

Akhmed Zakayev, Prime-Minister-in-Exile, is the key figure of the moderate faction (curiously Zakayev usually rejects the idea of a division amongst the Chechen leaders post-Second Chechen War) that flew to seek asylum across Europe in towns like London, Vienna, Warsaw, Madrid, Prague, Berlin and Paris. According to Akhmed Zakayev both Ramazan Kadyrov (Head of the Chechen Republic) and Dokka Umarov “are enemies of a Chechen State and each of them is collaborating with external forces” (Ukrainian Week, 2011) endangering the viability of the Ichkeria project.

The revolutionary faction, leaded by Aslan Mashkadov, took shelter in the mountains and dense forests of Chechnya and Ingushetia and started a guerrilla war, with several attacks on Russian troops and suicide bombers being carried out. In March 2005, Mashkadov was killed by the FSB troops in the Chechen village of Tolstoy-Yurt. But the insurgency does not die with him.

Twenty four hours after the announcement of the death of Aslan Mashkadov (the most moderate leader of the rebel faction), the Chechen Council announced the nomination of Abdul-Halim Salamovich Sadulayev as new leader of the insurgency. Dokka Umarov becomes Vice-President with Shamil Basayev, the most respected guerrilla commander of the insurgency, giving its support and pleading allegiance to the new leadership.

In May 2005 the insurgency gives its first imperceptible step towards a de-Chechenization pattern when Shamil Basaev created the Caucasian Front, at the request of Sadulayev. The Caucasian Front introduced new jamaats (operating units) in Karachaevo-Cherkessia, Kabardino-Balkaria, North Ossetia, Krasnodar and Stavropol and reformulated the already existing cells of Chechnya, Ingushetia and Dagestan. The idea was to unite the different ethnonational groups of the Caucasus under a militaristic ultraconservative and anti-
Russian banner. Chechens remained the focus of the insurgency but the work with other native ethnic groups increased exponentially.

In June 2006, Sadulayev is killed by the FSB forces while “planning a big terrorist attack in the Chechen town of Argun” (Pravda, 2006). One month later, Moscow announces to the world that “Shamil Basayev has been killed, according to the head of Russia's Federal Security Service” (Daily Mail, 2006). The killings of the Sadulayev and Basayev, temporarily undermine the operation capability of the group, but do not weaken the resolve of the insurgency.

In September 2006, Ali Musaevich Taziev (an Ingush) is appointed to the position of leader of the Caucasian Front by the new President of the insurgency: Dokka Umarov. The Caucasian Front opens two additional “units” outside of the North Caucasus in the Volga (Tatarstan) and Ural (Bashkortostan) regions. After that date only one big operation, in Vedeno (Chechnya) in the beginning of October 2007, is attributed to the group.

In October 31, 2007, “surprising everybody, Dokka Umarov resigned to his post [as fifth President of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria] but only to declare himself as the “Emir” (Commander-in-Chief) of the II Caucasus Emirate” (Lopes, 2011: 319). The second step to De-Chechenize the insurgency was given. After establishing interethnic cooperation, the group would now move on from an ethnonopolitical agenda to an ethnoreligious agenda.

Small pause just to underline that although the majority of the press and experts refers to Dokka Umarov’s project solely as Caucasus Emirate this is historically inaccurate. In September 1919, Uzun Hajji has proclaimed the establishment of the first Emirate of the North Caucasus; the project was unable to endure being annihilated by the Soviet forces in February 1920 (Gammer, 2006:130-132).

In June 2006, after being appointed has fifth President of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria Dokka Umarov issued a statement in which he cleared his goals: he wanted Moscow to acknowledge the right for self-determination of the Chechen people. In 31 October 2007, Umarov was calling for a unification of all native Caucasian Muslim against Moscow. The apparent transformation of Umarov’s plans leads to an inevitable question: Why did Umarov changed his vision about the future of the Chechen insurgency?

Although it is difficult to state categorically what pushed Umarov towards an Islamisation of the insurgency, it is clear that the encounter between Dokka Umarov and Anzor Astemirov (a Kabarda) had a great impact on his decision. Both men met in Kabardino-Balkaria in November 2006. Astemirov, a theologian, explained why he “believed that the establishment of a Sharia-based Islamic state, be it in Chechnya or elsewhere in the Northern Caucasus, should be the movement’s main strategic goal” (Leahy, 2010: 267).

Basically, Umarov instead of fighting for the right of the Chechens for ethnonational self-determination should push for the creation of a pan-Islamic state. This new state would be created under the Sharia law, would accomplish the legacies of Shamyl and Uzun Hajji and
would also expel the unfaithful Russians (majorly Orthodox Christians) and return the lands to the hands of the North Caucasus ethnic groups.

Another important question, regarding the De-Chechenization of the insurgency under Umarov’s leadership, that needs to be answered is: How can we be sure of the transformation from an ethnopolitical all-Chechen insurgency to an ethnoreligious ultraconservative-Muslim irredentist group? In the end of October 2007, when Umarov renounce to is presidential role he simultaneously “declared himself “Emir of militants of the Caucasus and the leader of Jihad” as well as “the only legitimate authority on all territories, where there are mujahideen”” (Caucasus Times, 2009).

While establishing the II Caucasus Emirate, Dokka Umarov claims for a triple leadership role: Emir (political leadership), leader of the Jihad (religious leadership) and sole legitimate authority of the mujahideen (judicial leadership). Interestingly, in none of these roles there is a reference to its ethnic origin, or to the right of the Chechens for self-determination that he defended so vehemently when nominated fifth president of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria in June 2006.

**Coups, plots and tension: side effects of De-Chechenizing the insurgency**

The inaugural speech of the establishment of the II Caucasus Emirate and interethnic cooperation at the Caucasian Front are hardly enough evidence to support this idea of de-Chechenization of the insurgency. The XIX century Caucasian Imamate (1828-1859), that had Shamyl’s as its third leader, was also capable to raise some interethnic cooperation amongst Checheno-Daguestani natives but there were never claims to political power. The Caucasian Imamate never interfered with ethnic politics, with Shamyl claiming more for spiritual and religious allegiance than temporal/political power.

There is another difference between the XIX century, Caucasian Imamate and the XXI century II Caucasus Emirate. Shamyl never declared a jihad but a gazavat: “gazavat was neither a war that intended to bring faith to the pagans nor an attack on infidels (…) Rather gazavat was zeal of a Muslim on his way to Allah” (Ware and Kisriev, 2010: 19). Gazavat was a mystical rebellion against all sorts of oppression. Shamyl was only showing the path (tariqa) towards liberation.

Differently, with Dokka Umarov “we have evidence of a personnel connection between the North Caucasus [irredentist forces] and the global jihad” (Hahn, 2011: 13). The idea of Jihad is not attached to ethnopolitical agendas but to a “just, legitimate, total and permanent war” (Costa, 2003, p. 42) to defend Islam from its enemies. In this regard, the declaration of jihad (holy war) by the leader of the II Caucasus Emirate can be interpreted as a strong evidence of a de-Chechenizing tendency supported by the insurgency high echelons and defended by its leadership.

The pattern of big actions conducted by the II Caucasus Emirate also shows this tendency to ethnoreligious irredentism instead of ethnopolitical secessionism. If we exclude the
Vladikavkaz bombings of September 2010 (16 deaths) and the Makhachkala bombings of May 2012 (13 deaths) the majority of the attacks were perpetrated outside of the North Caucasus: Nevsky Express bombing of November 2009 (causing 28 deaths); Moscow Metro bombing of March 2010 (40 deaths); Domodedovo International Airport bombing of January 2011 (37 deaths); Volgograd bombings of December 2013 (34 deaths).

The perpetration of big actions outside of the North Caucasus counts as another evidence of this de-Chechenizing evidence if we keep in mind that the “discourse of nationalism is inherently international. Claims to nationhood are not just internal claims to social solidarity, common descent, or any other basis for constituting a political community. They are also claims to distinctiveness vis-a-vis other nations, claims to at least some level of autonomy and self-sufficiency” (Calhoun, 1993: 216) in a certain predetermined territory.

Conducting attacks outside of the North Caucasus reveals a new agenda, detached from ethnopolitical goals. This non-ethnopolitical agenda, curiously, is confirmed in May 2011, when Umarov declares that “the days when we wanted to secede and dreamed of building a small Chechen Kuwait in the Caucasus are over” (The Long War Journal, 2012). By embracing an ethnoreligious approach, Umarov not only opened the insurgency to claim full domination over the entire North Caucasus but also opened “space” for criticism.

In May 2011, the moderate faction in exile, in Paris, “criticized the way in which Umarov renounced the cause of an independent Chechnya in favor of a hypothetical Islamic state encompassing the entire North Caucasus” (Caucasus Report, 2011). The meeting also appointed a new Military Commander for the Chechen insurgency troops still fighting in Chechnya, confirming the long perceived split between the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria (ethnopolitical all-Chechen project) and the II Caucasus Emirate (ethnoreligious project).

There is another evidence of this de-Chechenizing pattern! The nomination, in November 2006, of Khaled Yusuf Muhammad (a Saudi Arabian) has top-Commander of the Chechen front of the II Caucasus Emirate, shows a new level of de-Chechenization with non-native fighters assuming the lead of the fight. Killed in April 2011, Muhammad was replaced by Doger Sevdet “a Turkish [Kurd] citizen by birth [that] moved to the restive Russian region in 1991 after living in neighboring Georgia” (CNN, 2011). Sevdet would be killed in May 2011, leaving the position indefinitely open as far as we know.

This de-Chechenizing tendency was not well accepted by all top-Commanders. Besides the external opposition of the exiled moderate ethnonational faction still aiming for the establishment of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, Umarov also faced some strong internal opposition that tried to seize power from him during the unexpected events of August 2010.

On the 1st of August of 2010, an on-line video was released in which Dokka Umarov resigns to his position has Emir of the II Caucasus Emirate but clarifying that he would continue the struggle alongside with the other irredentist forces. The news of the resignation surprised everybody but the continuity of the project was ensured since on the 24th of July the “leader of the North Caucasus armed resistance movement, Dokka
Umarov, made a surprising announcement on who will succeed him as Emir of the Caucasus Emirate in case he was killed or arrested” (Eurasia Daily Monitor a., 2010).

On the 24th of July, Aslanbek Vadalov, a Chechen, was selected to continue the work of Dokka Umarov, also a Chechen. On the 1st of August, Vadalov declared that he was now the new Emir of the II Caucasus Emirate. In an unexpected, and very Hollywood-alike, twist of events “on August 4, a new video appeared in which Umarov said he was refusing to quit the post of the Caucasus emir and said his previous statement had been fabricated by the Russian Federal Security Service” (Eurasia Daily Monitor b.), 2010).

The attempt of a semi-legitimized “forest coup” revealed tension between the Chechen commanders, several of them siding with Vadalov, and Dokka Umarov. The shift from an ethnonational secessionist group with an all-Chechen agenda to an ethnoreligious irredentist group with an all-Wahhabi agenda greatly diminished the symbolic power of the Chechen commanders.

Although later in August 2010, Vadalov pledge again its allegiance to Umarov it is clear that the de-Chechenizing pattern opened a serious rift between the more conservative ethnonational commanders and the more pious ethnoreligious commanders. Several sectors of the Chechen insurgency compare Umarov’s betrayal to the ethnonational cause to Ramzan Kadyrov’s (Head of the Republic of Chechnya, whose father curiously fought alongside with Dokka Umarov) loyalist alliance with Moscow.

The post-Umarov, II Caucasus Emirate

In the end of October 2007, Dokka Umarov established the creation of the II Caucasus Emirate transforming an ethnonational agenda into an ethnoreligious campaign. The Emir of the Caucasus Emirate “redefined the objective of the Caucasus jihad. It was no longer a national struggle for independence from Russia waged by the Chechens (...) Rather, his movement and new state are part and parcel of the universal confrontation between Islam and its enemies worldwide” (Knysh, 2009: 5).

In other words “the Emirate wishes to act as an ideological, logistical and organizational hub of the North Caucasian strife” (Rękawek 2011: 5) with a focus on ethnoreligious homogenization and not on ethnonational self-determination. In this perspective, de-Chechenizing is not just a tendency but a necessity to ensure the survival of the irredentist group and its capacity to attract fighters, rebels and warriors.

In January 2014, Ramzan Kadyrov announced to the world that Dokka Umarov was dead. To the experts, analysts and researchers focused on Caucasian Affairs, the news of the demise of Umarov raised more caution than celebration. The scientific community did not forget that Dokka “Umarov has been pronounced dead multiple times only to inevitably surface again somewhere on the Internet to rally supporters and threaten new attacks in prerecorded videos” (Moscow Times, 2014).
The news was confirmed by the II Caucasus Emirate, in a video posted on-line on March 18. The video also announce that Aliasaskhab Kebekov (an Avar) is the new Emir because a “six-man “[Majlis-ash]-shura” (Council) appointed by [Dokka] Umarov has selected him as Umarov's successor” (Caucasus Report, 2014), nullifying Vadalov’s nomination of July 2010. The appointment of an Avar to succeed to Umarov (Chechen) in the lead of the II Caucasus Emirate, confirms the de-Chechenizing pattern that without discriminating the Chechen commanders diminishes their overall importance by equalizing them with the other native (fighters from the North Caucasus) and non-native (fighters from the Islamic realm) irredentist forces.

The nomination of Aliasaskhab Kebekov as new Emir does not only confirm the pattern of de-Chechenization but also the transformation from an ethnonational fight for self-determination towards an ethnoreligious was of “us versus them”. The nomination of a theologian confirms the preponderance of political Islam over ethnic politics inside the II Caucasus Emirate. The transition from Umarov’s leadership to Kebekov might explain the absence of attacks perpetrated by the irredentist forces during the Sochi Winter Olympics, but should not be seen as a downsizing on the operational capabilities of the group.

We have to keep in mind that Moscow’s brutal policies in the North Caucasus play against Moscow’s interests. The continuous “arbitrary arrests of Muslims, blanket closure of mosques, and rough tactics by corrupt and discredited police and security forces have alienated the populace further, increasing the lure of the militant variant of Islam” (Dunlop and Menon, 2006: 101) defended by the II Caucasus Emirate supreme theologian (qadi) and new Emir: Kebekov.

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