



Jihad and Ethnicity in Post-Communist Eurasia. On the Trail of Transnational Islamic Holy Warriors in Kashmir, Afghanistan, Central Asia, Chechnya and Kosovo

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With the arrival of US and coalition troops in Kandahar and Kabul, Afghanistan, following the unexpectedly swift destruction of the fundamentalist Taliban regime in November 2001, a new element has appeared in an ongoing ethno-religious struggle that had been destabilizing the heartlands of Eurasia since the early 1990s. The unexpected appearance of US, British, Turkish and other ISAF (International Security and Assistance Forces) in a country whose extremist theocracy has attempted to disseminate its fundamentalist interpretation of Islam to the neighboring regions drastically altered the status quo in the latest chapter in the 'Great Game' struggle for the soul of Central Asia and the Caucasus.¹

This latest version of a centuries-old conflict for influence in Central Eurasia has pitted Saudi-style Wahhabi fundamentalists against indigenous secularists/Sufi-mystics in a transcontinental battle costing tens of thousands of lives. While largely overlooked outside of this region, this bloody struggle has surged across Eurasia, from the Pamir Mountains of Tajikistan and the Kashmir Vale in the Himalayas, to the mountain villages of the secessionist statelet of Chechnya and the war scorched plains of Kosovo.

This struggle for power and the nature of Islam in the heartlands of Eurasia has been especially bloody in the plains of northern Afghanistan (the Uzbek, Tajik, and Hazara lands around Mazar-i Sharif), Kashmir, eastern Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, as well as the small ethno-republics of the Russian Federation's north Caucasian flank (Chechnya, Ingushetia, and Dagestan in particular).

The sudden destruction of the Taliban theocracy and Osama bin Laden's Afghanistan-based *al-Qaeda al-Subah* (The Solid Base) has drastically altered this struggle for Central Eurasia that commenced with the fall of Communism. The collapse of the Taliban 'house of cards' in 2001 has given the secularist, ex-Communist rulers of Central Asia, as well as local *Sufi*-mystic leaders of this region an unexpected victory over their fundamentalist opponents. In essence, the eradication of the extremist Taliban theocracy has set back the efforts on the part of Saudi-funded Wahhabi fundamentalist missionaries and Al Qaeda-trained *jihadis* (holy warriors) to extend their puritanical interpretation of Islam across the Amu Darya River (N. Afghanistan) and into the *Sufi* lands of the post-Soviet Uzbeks, Tajiks, Kyrgyz, and Uighurs.

A background assessment of this understudied conflict presents unique insights into the ways in which pre-existing conflicts between Arab-sponsored fundamentalists, local *Sufi*-mystics, and various Eurasian ethnic groups have been subsumed in the US-led global struggle against *jihadi*-militants.

Sufis and Commissars. The Nature of Soviet Islam

To understand the true character of the conflict of Islam that has destabilized much of Eurasia over the last decade, one must first engage in a background excursus on the ways in which Eurasian Communism altered the existing Islamic societies of this vast region. During the Soviet-atheist period, Orthodox high Islam in the USSR's Muslim borderlands was shattered by a series of anti-religious drives in the 1920s and 1930. These brutal drives saw *mullahs* executed as 'parasites,' mosques closed *en masse*, holy texts destroyed, Arabic script replaced with Cyrillic, and most facets of official Islam in the Soviet ethno-republics suppressed. As a result of this experience, the average Muslim I came in contact with in the various national republics of the former Soviet Union more closely resembled *Homo Sovieticus* than *Homo Islamicus*.

¹ For an analysis of the Taliban's efforts to destabilize neighboring states, see Rashid (1999).

From the sunny coasts of the Crimean Peninsula (home to secularized Muslim Crimean Tatars) to the religiously conservative oasis *kishlaks* (villages) of southern Uzbekistan and cliff top villages of the high Caucasus, I found the Muslims of this multi-ethnic region to be more familiar with the sayings of Marx than Muhammad.² Throughout the former USSR, Muslims I interacted with often spoke Russian more fluently than their native tongue, drank vodka with a relish that strict Saudi puritans would have found offensive, and considered folk Islam to be merely a *component* of their secularized national identities.

Official Orthodox Islam in the USSR had been systematically destroyed by the KGB-NKVD driven anti-religious drives of the 1930s and the only manifestations of Islam to survive this state-sponsored onslaught were the ancient, *Sufi*-mystical folk beliefs of the common people that operated below the surface throughout the Soviet period.

Islamic morality and identity were sustained in this period of state sponsored atheism only by the folk Islam of the *Sufi*-mystics that could not be eradicated despite the robust efforts by the Kremlin to uproot popular Islam in the backward Muslim provinces. For the Tatars, Uzbeks, Chechens, Kazakhs, and various other national groups I encountered in this ethnically diverse region, 'Islam' consisted of festivals (often local holidays, such as *Nawraz*-New Year, that had pre-Islamic roots with no links to the high festivals of Islam, such as the Islamic holy month of Ramadan). Ethnic Islam in this region was also made up of ancient patriarchal traditions, conservative sexual mores, *zikirs* (chanting Allah's name, often in dances), local superstitions, Arabic-Islamic personal names, and a vague awareness of being culturally different from the dominant 'Christian' Russians. A 'good Muslim' in the USSR might pray on the occasional Friday, wear a *sabab* (amulet) blessed by a *Sufi* mystic, visit the shrines of local saints for cures (*ziyarat*s), and refuse to have his or her daughter marry a non-Muslim.

Despite the continuance of *Sufi* traditions below the surface, it should come as no surprise that the Soviets' pervasive policies of secularization created a cultural and religious chasm between Muslims of the isolated USSR and the bulk of Sunni Muslims in conservative Middle Eastern countries. On many levels, the Islamic lands of the Soviet Muslim peoples, such as the Chechen highlanders of the Caucasus Mountains, Kyrgyz shepherds of the Tien Shan Mountains, and the Tajik and Uzbek farmers of the oases of southern Central Asia, were psychologically, spiritually, and culturally cut off from the *Dar al-Islam* (Islamic realm) by the Soviet experiment. The fact that the Soviet Muslims had only an inchoate, *Sufi* form of folk Islam only magnified the differences between Orthodox Arabs of the strictly Wahhabi Saudi state and secularized Muslims of the USSR.

This isolating experience was to make this vast, secularized *Sufi* region a fertile proselytizing ground for foreign missionaries when the Communist USSR fell for, in many ways, the newly independent ex-Soviet Muslim mystics of the 1990s were a people in need of a faith renewal. Although I had come into contact with American missionaries attempting to convert the Muslims to Christianity in the region, it was not, however, American Christians who found this area a fertile proselytizing ground, but Wahhabi missionaries from the religiously conservative states of the Arab Gulf. In the process of offering the ex-Soviet Muslims a new sense of Orthodox spirituality and a vehicle for opposition to post-Soviet dictatorships, however, the entrepreneurs of Arabic fundamentalist Islam and militant *jihadism* were to threaten the traditional ethnic, political, and religious order in this lost Islamic realm. Most alarmingly, the extremists among them were also to link these once-isolated Muslim ethnies to the terrorist struggle of the world's most wanted terrorist, Osama bin Laden, and his global *jihadi* movement.

² For an analysis of the secular Crimean Tatars and their experience with ethnocide, see Williams (2001a).



Allah's Foot Soldiers: The Afghan Conflict and the Export of Wahhabi Extremism

Outsiders who are prone to paint all Muslims with a broad brush strokes often underestimate the differences between the experiences and identities of Muslims who lived in the USSR and those who lived in the land of the Two Holy Cities, Saudi Arabia. In Saudi Arabia, for example, a state-sponsored, austere form of fundamentalist Islam unofficially known as *Wahhabism*, was actively enforced by the *Committee for the Prevention of Vice and Promotion of Virtue* (a religious police force that was later imitated by the Taliban), while Soviet Muslims experienced anti-religious drives by the *Committee for State Security* (the KGB).

While Soviet Muslims worked to construct a utopian society based on a Marxist-proletarian *future*, the Wahhabi fundamentalists in Saudi Arabia by contrast sought to turn back the hands of time and emulate an idyllic *past* as it had supposedly existed during the epoch of the Prophet Muhammad. As Soviet Marxist materialists sought to create a 'workers' paradise' on earth, the Wahhabi faithful in Saudi Arabia looked forward to the heavenly paradise promised them by the Prophet. At a time when the Kremlin saw the Muslim peoples of the USSR as members of the 'international class of workers and toilers' (the *proletariat*), the Saudis saw these 'oppressed' Soviet brothers and sisters as lost members of the ecumenical community of Muslim believers (the *umma*).

Seen in this light, it is not surprising that, during the Cold War, diplomatic relations between the atheist Soviets and the staunchly conservative-fundamentalist Saudis were almost non-existent. This visceral hatred of the atheist Soviets on the part of the Saudis was further acerbated by the USSR's bloody invasion of the Muslim land of Afghanistan in December 1979. During the 1980s, the Saudi *Istikhabarat* (Secret Service), working in conjunction with several Saudi charities, the Pakistani ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence), and the CIA, channeled tens of millions of dollars and thousands of young Arab fighters from Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Morocco, Egypt and elsewhere to the battlefields of Afghanistan. In the *Dar al-Harb* (Abode of War), these international holy warriors waged *jihād* (holy war) against the Soviet invaders of Afghanistan with the aim of preventing the 'Godless-atheists' from absorbing yet another chunk of the *Dar al-Islam* (Abode of Islam) (Griffiths 2001: 229).

While the mono-focused CIA aimed to cynically use these holy warriors as proxies to bleed America's Cold War nemesis to death in the unforgiving mountains of Afghanistan's Hindu Kush, the Saudis had a more ambitious, long term agenda that reflected their own equally dualistic vision of the world. As 'Protectors of the Holy Places of Mecca and Medina' and followers of a puritan form of Islam, the Saudis considered it their duty to not only defend the *umma* from the infidel atheists, but to propagate their 'true' interpretation of Islam throughout the world.

While the US was sending millions of dollars to finance the anti-Soviet *mujahideen*, (holy warriors) the Saudis (with the active support of the Islamist leader of Pakistan, Zia al Haq) used their money to not only arm the *mujahideen*, but to disseminate their Wahhabi version of Islam to tens of thousands of Afghan refugees, war orphans, and Pashtun tribesmen in Pakistan's neighboring Northwest Frontier Province.

In scores of Saudi-sponsored *madrasas* (seminaries), desperately poor Afghans and Pakistani *Talibs* (students) learned a puritanical, fundamentalist version of Islam that challenged their traditional *Sufi* folk Islamic practices (Griffin 2001: ch. 11).³ This proselytizing subtext to the war against the Soviets was the product of a movement in Saudi Arabia's charities and certain government circles that sought to use the country's wealth and influence to propagate Saudi Wahhabism under the pretext of waging *jihād* against Communist aggression.

³ This form of Islam represented a *melange* of Indian-Deobandi fundamentalism and Saudi-Wahhabism.

It is, however, not widely recognized that the strict Wahhabi fundamentalist movements in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States were militantly intent on not only defending 'pure' Islam from the contamination of Soviet atheism and Western secularism, *but aimed to cleanse Islam itself of its perceived impurities or false folk practices of the sort found in the traditional Sufi Islam of the Afghans, Kashmiris, Central Asians, and Caucasian Muslims.*

While thousands of Arab fundamentalist fighters took their *external* military struggle against Soviet-atheist imperialism to the battlefield by volunteering to fight alongside the Afghan *mujahideen* in the 1980s *jihad-i ashgar* ('military struggle') against the 'Godless Soviet invaders' of Afghanistan, the Arab puritans simultaneously waged an *internal* theological *jihad-i akbar* ('higher struggle', i.e., spiritual struggle) (Ahady 2002). This largely unnoticed Wahhabi-funded struggle aimed to purify Eurasian Islam of its 'heretical impurities' and return it to its romanticized roots as they were imagined to have existed in Medieval Arabia at the time of the *Salafi* (the first few generations of Muslims in Mecca).

It was thus in the context of the Afghan conflict that the Saudis first began actively using their petro-dollars to export their Wahhabi-fundamentalist interpretation of Islam across the globe in an effort to purify local Islamic practices from Bosnia to Bali.

This *ad hoc* operation began with the selective dissemination of Saudi funds only to radical fundamentalist *mujahideen* groups fighting against the Soviets in Afghanistan, a process that in many ways empowered a new militant version of global Islamic fundamentalism at the expense of moderate *Sufi* Islam. Moderate (and highly successful) Afghan field commanders, such as Massoud the Tajik 'Lion of Panjshir,' for example, were not provided funding by the Saudis or the Pakistani ISI (which controlled US funding for the *mujahideen* factions). Openly *anti-Western* fundamentalist extremists (mainly Pashtuns), such as extremist warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, on the other hand received millions of dollars in support (Cooley 2000: ch. 4). This policy was to pay dividends when ultra-puritanical extremist Taliban seized control of Afghanistan and initiated a Wahhabi style theocracy in this previously Sufi-oriented land from 1996-2001.

It should be stressed that this export of Islamic fundamentalism was not limited to the official Saudi government. Wahhabi Saudi charities and NGOs also took advantage of the *Qu'ran's* injunction on pious Muslims to pay a *zakat* ('tithe') to channel millions of dollars into exporting their rigid form of Islam to a wide array of local settings. These settings varied from Indonesia (where the local moderate form of Islam was radicalized by such Saudi-sponsored groups as the Wahhabi-style *Lashkar Jihad* or the *Jemaah Islamiya*, which has been held responsible for the deadly Oct. 2002 terrorist bombing in Bali) to the *madrasas* (seminaries) of Pakistan (von Bruinessen 2002).

Most importantly, it was the Saudi-sponsored extremist *madrasas* in Pakistan that subsequently spewed forth thousands of ethnic Pashtun holy warriors who would later form the backbone of the harsh Taliban regime which ruled neighboring Afghanistan from 1994-2001 (Goodson 1989: 76 and 101). As witnessed in the harsh rule of the Taliban in Afghanistan, in many of these diverse ethnic and geographic contexts the alien, Saudi version of Islam was to prove extremely disruptive to traditional indigenous Islamic orders *and* pre-existing inter-ethnic relations.⁴

Prior to the 1996 creation of the Taliban's Wahhabi style 'religious concentration camp' in Afghanistan, for example, this land was known for its free-wheeling, mystical *Sufi* Islam. In

⁴ It has been argued that the Pashtun Taliban, in fact, inaugurated a program of ethnic cleansing in much of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. This brutal program aimed to gradually rid areas such as the Shomali Plain north of Kabul and eventually the northern plains of Afghan Turkestan of their non-Pashtun ethnic groups.



his discussion of the easy-going, traditional form of Islam found in pre-Taliban Afghanistan, Louis Dupree writes 'Islam practiced in villages and nomad camps, would be almost unrecognizable to a sophisticated Muslim scholar. Aside from faith in Allah and Muhammad as the messenger of Allah, most beliefs related to localized, pre-Muslim traditions.' (Dupree 1973: 103)

Following the Saudi-sponsored Taliban conquest of Afghanistan, however, all Afghan Muslim women (including those belonging to ethnic groups that had never forced their women to wear the veil, such as the Uzbeks) were forced to wear *burqas*. The misogynistic Taliban also decreed that all men were forced to grow Saudi Wahhabi-style beards and attend mosque, televisions were to be destroyed as tools of Satan, and a multitude of harsh *shariah* (Islamic) laws were to be enforced in a moderate land that had never known these alien traditions. In its final years, the Taliban became even more extreme as the Saudi Wahhabis belonging to Osama bin Laden's Al-Qaeda and O55 International Brigade encouraged the destruction of 'heathen idols' (such as the centuries-old stone Buddhas at Bamiyan), the public execution of adulterers, and the export of fundamentalist Islam to neighboring lands.

This latter policy of supporting the spread of Taliban-style fundamentalism to neighboring regions, such as Kashmir and Uzbekistan, actually began in the early 1990s. As early as 1992, Arab Wahhabi missionaries and Arab *mujahideen* veterans from Afghanistan began to disseminate both *Qur'ans* and AK-47 machine guns throughout the region. In the decade following the fall of the USSR, Arab-sponsored fundamentalist missions in the ex-Soviet Muslim republics were to merge with newly formed, *indigenous* Islamic revivalist movements to forge political and military threats to the repressive ex-Communist regimes that maintained control of these newly independent republics (or small ethno-provinces still found *within* Russia).

For those following this alarming progress the spread of a virulent new form of global Wahhabism took on an inexorability that reflected this movement's militant origins in the desert kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Forging the Jihad. The Historic Roots of Neo-Wahhabism

The export of this alien Wahhabi form of Islam throughout Eurasia in the late 1980s and 90s was the natural outgrowth of a historic process of forced proselytizing that actually commenced in the late 18th century with the founding of Saudi Arabia. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was founded when an Arabian Bedouin chief named Muhammad ibn Saud forged an alliance with an iconoclastic Muslim purifier, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, and seized control of central Arabia.

The Saudi regime and powerful Wahhabi 'clergy class' have, since this time, become the political expression of an intolerant purifying sect that has sought to cleanse global Islam of its local 'un-Islamic' traditions, *including the underground Sufi-mystical form of Islam that ironically enough sustained the Soviet Muslims' religious identity during the period of Communist-enforced atheism.*⁵ This purifying Saudi sect is unofficially known as Wahhabism after its spiritual founder, al-Wahhab, but its adherents in Saudi Arabia and fundamentalists in the post-Soviet Caucasus and Central Asia reject this term with its implications of adherence to a mortal's teachings.⁶

In its essence, Wahhabism is an ultra puritanical, literalist interpretation of Islam that seeks to return Islam to its strictly interpreted fundamentals as they existed at the time

⁵ The Wahhabi family has intermarried with the Saudi family and still act as powerful spiritual advisors in the Kingdom.

⁶ Many modern Wahhabis who claim to emulate the *Salafi*, the original Muslims of Arabia during the time of the Prophet Muhammad, instead call themselves *Salafites* (Traditionalists).

of the Prophet (that is before Allah's message became perverted by un-Islamic, *Sufi*-style innovations/heresies, known as *bidhat*, or watered down by the insidious influence of Western secularism). This form of Islam was carried throughout the deserts of Arabia with fire and sword by an army of fanatical warriors known as the *Ikhwan* (Brotherhood).

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Saud's fanatical militant *Ikhwan* holy warriors organized raiding parties for attacking the neighboring lands (such as Mandate Iraq, where they destroyed Shiite shrines, or the Hijaz, where they cleansed Mecca and Medina of their ancient religious edifices). The *Ikhwan* raiders forcefully spread their version of Islam to the lands of all 'heretics' or 'polytheists' who worshipped saints or visited forbidden religious shrines.

This process of militant propagation of Wahhabi puritanism ended when the Saudi regime reigned in the increasingly disruptive *Ikhwan* in order to open diplomatic relations with the British who became sponsors of the Saudi regime (until the Americans assumed this responsibility in the 1950s).

It was not, however, until the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 that this early Saudi tradition of aggressive Wahhabi-*Ikhwan* militancy was wedded to a new form of global *jihadi* Islam first formulated in Egypt by Islamic scholar, Sayid Qutb (d. 1966). It was Qutb who first set down the obligation of modern Muslims to wage *jihad* as an unofficial 'sixth pillar' of Islam in his seminal work entitled *Milestones* (Huband 1999: 88). A later Egyptian scholar, Muhammad al-Farag, declared *jihad* to be the 'Neglected Duty' (*Al-Faridah Al-Gha'ibah*) of all Muslims and his works appear to have inspired the likes of Ayman al-Zawaheri (the founder of the *Egyptian Islamic Jihad* and spiritual mentor for Osama bin Laden) (Jansen 1986).

As Muslim extremists of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (*al-Ikhwan al Muslimun*) translated these fiery words into reality, they rushed to partake in the 1980s *jihad* against the Soviets with Egyptian President, Anwar Sadat's, blessing and financial support. Thousands of young Arabs from Egypt, the Gulf states, and North Africa were subsequently flown for free on Saudi airlines to Pakistan to train in ISI camps and wage *jihad* against the Soviets.

The global export of a new form of militancy that mixed Saudi Wahhabi militant-fundamentalism of the earlier *Ikhwan* with a newly codified Egyptian revival of the Medieval *jihad* thus served as a backdrop for the events surrounding the cataclysmic collapse of Eurasian Communism in the USSR's Central Asia republics in 1991 (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan) and the overthrow of the Communist regime in Afghanistan in 1992. With the demise of the USSR and the belated overthrow of the Communist-dominated Najibullah regime in Afghanistan (and the removal of the *raison d'etre* of the Arab *jihad* in Afghanistan), many newly unemployed Arab-Afghan *mujahideen* veterans and Wahhabi missionaries refocused their sights on a vast array of new 'lands of *jihad*.'⁷

Having made themselves unwelcome in their former homelands through such bloody acts as the assassination of their former patron, Anwar Sadat, (a boomerang effect known as 'blowback') and the commencement of a brutal struggle for power with the secularist ruling regime in Algeria (which cost 60-80,000 their lives), the 'Arab-Afghans' found themselves stateless and roaming the planet in search of new homes and wars to wage in the name of Allah.

⁷ These fighters belonged to the 'Azzam Brigades', international fighters from Egypt, Algeria, Yemen etc. who had been organized by Osama bin Laden's first mentor, Abdullah Azzam.



The most prominent of these post-Afghan 'lands of *jihad*' was to be the predominantly Muslim-inhabited Vale of Kashmir, which had been fought over by India and Pakistan since 1947. While the local *Sufi* Muslims of the Indian portion of this disputed Himalayan territory, known as Jammu and Kashmir, had been chaffing under Indian rule, the struggle for Kashmiri independence (*Kashmiriyat*) from India had not been directed against the Kashmiri Muslims' Hindu neighbors in the Vale, nor had it taken on the aspect of a brutal holy war.

By 1989, however, the Kashmiri Muslims had risen up against the abuse of the *jawans* (Indian army troops) who regularly tortured suspected Kashmiri separatists, attacked Kashmiri Muslim villages in search and destroy sweeps, and summarily executed suspected 'trouble makers' calling for Kashmiri independence. By 1992, many newly unemployed Arab, Pakistani, and Afghan veterans of the recently concluded Afghan conflict began to define the Indian army's brutal actions in Kashmir as infidel oppression of the Muslim faithful and the call for *jihad* resounded in the mosques and *madrasas* of Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Soon thereafter, the nature of the local uprising in Indian Kashmir began to change with the arrival of thousands of *jihadi* warriors from post-Communist Afghanistan (Arabs, Pakistanis, Afghans, and Yemenis for the most part) who espoused the cause of total war with the Hindu 'infidels' and brought with them their strict form of Wahhabi Islam. What had previously been a low level secessionist insurgency developed into a full-scale conflict which soon deprived thousands of their lives and turned the once-beautiful Valley of Kashmir into a devastated war zone.

In the process of waging an increasingly bloody *jihad* against the 'infidel-Indian occupiers of Kashmir,' the newly established Wahhabi *jihadist* organizations fighting Indian controlled Kashmir, such as the Afghan-trained *Harkat ul Mujahideen* (Movement of the Holy Warriors), *Lashkar e Toiba* (Army of the Pure) and *Jaish e Mohammed* (Army of Mohammed), attempted to inculcate their alien form of Islam among the easy-going Muslims Kashmiris. For example, the Muslim extremists attempted to enforce the veiling of Kashmiri women, attendance at Friday prayers, the closing of movie theaters, and the prohibition of alcohol. In the most extreme case, *Lashkar e Toiba* vigilantes even threw acid in the face of Kashmiri women who refused to wear the veil (Jones 2002: 29). Despite these actions, many in the Muslim world saw the *jihadi* volunteers as heroes aiding the local Kashmiris in their uneven struggle with brutal Indian military forces.⁸

As the *jihad* against the Indian Army in the Vale of Kashmir became a *cause célèbre* for extremists throughout the Muslim world, thousands of young Muslims who were drawn to the notion of holy war also began to consider directing the same sort of holy struggle against the ex-Communist governments of Central Asia.

Since the fall of the USSR in 1991, dictatorial ex-Communist leaders had seized power in the republics of Central Asia and true Muslim believers were said to face persecution at the hand of brutal 'Communist tyrants.' Tens of thousands of Central Asian Muslims were said to be in need of liberation from the 'Red Khans' who suppressed Islam and, most ominously, these lax *Sufi* Muslims of Central Asia were said to be desperately in need of *da'wa* (missionary work) in order to correct their heretical mystic folk practices.

The battle for the souls of Central Asia's 50 million secularized *Sufi* Muslims had begun. It was to be joined by scores of hardened veterans of the Afghan and Kashmir *jihads* as well as devout Saudi missionaries who believed that their charitable contributions would help spread Allah's message to the post-Soviet *Sufi* 'heretic -polytheists.' A variety of Eurasian

⁸ Since Sept. 11th, however, President Musharraf of Pakistan has outlawed these Pakistan-based transnational *jihadi* organizations as part of a general crackdown on Al-Qaeda and ISI-sponsored Islamic militants.

ethnic groups were to be caught up in this post-Communist, transcontinental Islamist struggle which soon spread from the lands of the Kashmiris and Afghan-Pashtuns to those of the Tajiks, Uzbeks, Kyrgyz, Chechens and Dagestani ethnies.

Suppressing Wahhabi 'Enemies of the People' in Post-Soviet Central Asia

In the post-Soviet context the term Wahhabi, or the more widely internalized alternative Salifite, refers to fundamentalist Islamists who seek to transcend ethnicity and politicize the local Islamic culture.

The post-Soviet version of Wahhabis have sought to purify societies that they see as being dominated by lax secular laws stemming from the Communist era or permeated with heretical *Sufi* traditions. Many post-Soviet Wahhabi leaders were young men who received scholarships from the Saudis to study in the Middle East in Wahhabi *madrasas* in the years following the collapse of the USSR. After returning to their homes in Central Asia or the Caucasus these zealous new Wahhabi converts scorned the traditional *Sufi* clergy, who often did not know Arabic nor conform to the rigid interpretation of Islam they found in the *madrasas* of the Arab world.

As a means of demonstrating their disdain for the old Islamic ways, these 'born again Muslims' refused to respect village elders and *Sufi pirs* (masters). Instead, they wore Wahhabi attire, such as long beards without mustaches, short pants, and long overgarments of the sort supposed to have been worn by Muhammad, as well as *hijabs* (full body dresses and head covering) for women.

While the Islamists' secular opponents claim that the 'Wahhabi' fundamentalist movements of post-Soviet Central Asia are led and funded by foreign Arab sponsors, there is, however, little doubt that these Islamic populist movements actually have home grown roots that were seized upon by those returning from the seminaries of the Arab world.

During the late 1980s period of liberalization in the USSR known as *glasnost* (openness), Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev allowed the emergence of an all-Soviet Islamic party known as the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP). As the USSR collapsed in 1991, Islamic fundamentalism and the IRP became something of a vogue, especially in traditionally conservative Tajikistan.

By 1992 opposition groups from throughout the newly independent Republic of Tajikistan began to unite under the banner of the IRP in an effort to wrest power from the hands of an entrenched group of former Communists who retained power in the Tajik capital, Dushanbe. Although the ex-Communist leadership accused their Islamic IRP opponents (who united with other regional and political opponents to form a political military coalition known as the United Tajik Opposition-UTO) of being 'Wahhabis' bent on seizing power and taking the country back to the Islamic Middle Ages, the IRP's goals were actually quite modest. The Islamists' agenda included the banning of such practices as singing at weddings, ritualized mourning at funerals (local *Sufi*-mystic traditions), the use of Sunday instead of Friday as a day of rest, and the consumption of meat that was not cut in an Islamic fashion (i.e., *halal* Islamic culinary taboos similar to *kosher* practices) (Rashid 2001).

As local politics and regional clan rivalries overlapped with the struggle between the Islamic opposition and the former Communist government in Dushanbe, full-scale civil war erupted in Tajikistan in 1992. This war between Islamists, led by Sayed Abdullo Nuri, and the central government was to be the bloodiest conflict in the former Soviet space and to involve all the neighboring states, including Russia which became the defender of the former Communist government of Tajikistan.



It is, however, erroneous to see this conflict as simply being between the secularist, ex-Communists and Islamists. Local sub-national ethno-tribal and regional groups, such as the Uzbeks of the Khojent region, Pamiri mountaineers (a distinct Ismaili-Shiite ethnic group from the Pamir Mountains), and southern Tajiks from the Kulyab region, all played a contributing role in the conflict.

Regardless of the underlying ethnic complexities, the ensuing conflict between the Islamist-regional opposition and the former Communists was to ebb and flow for five years until a UN brokered peace agreement was signed in 1997.

As the conflict between the Islamic UTO opposition and the government took the lives of over 50,000 Tajiks, the stunned ex-Communist leaders of the neighboring Central Asian republics, as well as China and Russia, united to form a common front against the 'Wahhabi' threat to secular stability in the region.

For the most part, however, the fundamentalist threat never materialized in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, or Turkmenistan. This was largely due to the fact that these ethno-national groups were former nomads who had a very watered-down, shamanistic version of ethnic Islam that was less strict than the Islam of the conservative, oasis-dwelling sedentary Tajiks and Uzbeks of southern Central Asia. In Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan I found women to be comparatively liberated (especially in the cities), alcohol was openly consumed, Russian language and dress were widespread, and Islam consisted largely of ethnic traditions.

When I spoke to my Kazakh friends of my interest in travelling to the traditional Islamic core of Central Asia, the Uzbek and Tajik areas to the south (where one found such centers of religious conservatism as the holy city of Bukhara), these Russified former nomads felt it necessary to warn me of the strict, patriarchal Islam that existed among their sedentary Uzbek and Tajik neighbors.

Seen in the light of history and tradition, the activities of the Wahhabis in post-Soviet Central Asia were therefore largely limited to the oasis dwelling Tajiks and Uzbeks and, to a much lesser extent, the Kyrgyz living in the Uzbek-dominated Fergana Valley region of Osh. There was nonetheless a real fear among the secular Kazakhs and Kyrgyz in the mid-1990s that the Islamist movements of the southern Tajiks and Uzbeks would threaten the stability of all Central Asia, and even Russia.

While the bloodshed and destruction in Tajikistan proved that the Islamic fundamentalist threat to rest of Central Asian stability was real, the subsequent 1997 peace treaty between the Islamist UTO 'rebels' and the secularist Tajik government brought a gradual end to this conflict and eased their fears. In the process, this treaty also allowed for (relatively) free elections in which representatives of the Islamist and regional opposition were included in the government in small numbers. This peace treaty may thus serve as an alternative path whereby secular regimes from Algeria to Uzbekistan can disarm their Islamic opponents by co-opting them into the government.

In Uzbekistan, by contrast, the struggle to suppress Wahhabism continues unabated to this day. As opposed to the ethno-regional-Islamic opposition in Tajikistan, the Muslim fundamentalist opposition which appeared in Uzbekistan can be definitively defined as Wahhabi. Wahhabis first appeared in Uzbekistan, the most populous country in post-Soviet Central Asia, in the early 1990s and began to spread their beliefs throughout this country with funding from Saudi Arabian NGO charities.

I found tangible evidence of this dissemination of fundamentalist Islam in the region in the form of unofficial mosques (often simple concrete edifices) that sprang up throughout the republic under the sponsorship of Saudi Wahhabis. While the Russified urbanites in the

Uzbek capital of Tashkent seemed to be less inclined to respond to the call of missionaries from Saudi Arabia, the over-populated Fergana Valley in eastern Uzbekistan proved to be a fertile ground for entrepreneurs of radical fundamentalism.

The teeming Fergana Valley is home to ten million of Central Asia's fifty million inhabitants and is home to many desperate Uzbeks whose economic situation has drastically deteriorated since the fall of the USSR brought hyperinflation in the 1990s. Many Uzbeks of the region blame their impoverished condition on the nepotism and rampant corruption of the ruling 'mafocracy' that has firmly ruled Uzbekistan since the final days of the USSR.

In the early 1990s, many Uzbek men in the Fergana Valley began to wear Wahhabi-style beards and women began to discard their brightly colored folk dresses, traditionally made of a silk material called *atlas*, and to wear modest, *chador*-style dark dresses and head scarves.

The most visible signs of this trend occurred in the Fergana Valley town of Namangan where unlicensed *imams* (preachers) who had recently been trained in Saudi Arabia began to preach a new form of austere Wahhabi fundamentalism. These radical *imams* called for the creation of an Islamic Caliphate (theocracy) in the valley that would eventually expand to include all of Central Asia.⁹ This was a bold challenge to the secular government of Islam Karimov, the president and 'founding father' of the newly independent Republic of Uzbekistan who had been appointed by the Kremlin to be head of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Uzbekistan just prior to the demise of the USSR. While Karimov had subsequently included token Islamic motifs in his state building project, his aim was to produce a secular, ethnicity-based Uzbek nation from the gerrymandered Soviet republic bequeathed to him by the Kremlin in 1991.

The Islamists in the Fergana region saw Karimov's efforts at secular nation building as *kavimlik* (religiously forbidden division of the *umma*-Islamic community on ethnic or tribal bases). The Wahhabis aimed to transcend Soviet-constructed ethnicity and replace it with a wider sense of supra-national religious identity in a fundamentalist theocracy.¹⁰

As the emboldened Islamic militants began to call for the implementation of *Shariah* law in Namangan, Karimov traveled to the Fergana Valley to meet with the fundamentalists in 1991. At this meeting the head of the Islamic extremists, Tohir Yoldeshev, a firebrand with a wide following, insulted the president and forced him to swear on the *Qu'ran* that he would implement Islamic law. A furious President Karimov subsequently returned to the Uzbek capital of Tashkent and promptly launched a statewide campaign to destroy the Wahhabis who were described in Soviet terms as 'enemies of the people.'

Since this time, unofficial mosques have been closed and their *imams* have been rounded up in police sweeps, thousands of those suspected of being Wahhabis have been summarily arrested on trumped up charges, and Islamists have been tortured or killed. To have a Wahhabi-style beard in Uzbekistan today is to ask to be arrested and shipped off to the dreaded prison camp known as Jasyk created to hold thousands of suspected Wahhabis.

The Wahhabis of Uzbekistan were accused of fighting back against the authorities, most famously by killing and beheading a policeman in Fergana and attempting to kill President Karimov in a deadly bombing outside the president's palace. In February 1999, Karimov

⁹ This Caliphate would include the Inner Asian Chinese province of Sinkiang inhabited by restless Turkic Uighurs whose language is related to that of the Uzbeks and Kazakhs.

¹⁰ For an excellent discussion of the role of the Soviets in constructing the national identity of Central Asia's Muslims, see Roy (2000: 139-41).



famously announced 'Such people (Wahhabis) must be shot in the forehead! If necessary, I'll shoot them myself!' (Human Rights Watch 1998)

Human rights groups have strongly criticized Karimov's government for its brutal policies which have seen many innocent Muslims caught up in police sweeps and sentenced to jail for such minor fractions as carrying 'Wahhabi agitation literature.' The greatest crime in Uzbekistan today, however, consists of belonging to one of the country's two main Islamic 'Wahhabi' parties. These are the *Hizb ut Tahrir al Islami* (Party of Islamic Liberation), which calls for the peaceful overthrow of the secular authorities, and the *Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan* (IMU), which has aimed for the violent destruction of the 'Godless-Zionist' regime of Karimov and the creation of an Islamic state for all Central Asia's ethno-national groups.

As Karimov launched brutal suppression campaigns against these groups, however, one specialist on Wahhabism in Central Asia wrote 'The radical measures of the authorities in the struggle with the religious opposition led to the increase in their ranks, to their radicalization, and to the inclusion in their ranks of foreign fighters who had experience in leading diversionary wars. One can say that the Uzbek authorities grew themselves enemies.' (Shermatova 2000: 408)

In essence, Karimov's widely publicized clamp downs on Wahhabi-style fundamentalists in Uzbekistan brought him the unwanted attention of *jihadi* groups operating in parts of Afghanistan (these Arab *jihadists* fought in the notorious Al-Qaeda 055 Brigade against the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance and were based in Kunduz and Mazar-i Sharif after 1998) and Kashmir. His actions also earned him domestic enemies who were soon to ally themselves with the foreign Arab *jihadists*. By 1999 the Uzbek Wahhabi opposition had begun to coordinate hit and run operations with the assistance of Arab *jihadi* guerrillas based in newly conquered Taliban lands in the plains of northern Afghanistan.

The most feared of Karimov's domestic enemies was to be an ex-Soviet paratrooper turned-Islamic guerilla who went by the *nom de guerre* Juma Namangani. Namangani became the military head of the IMU in the late 1990s and his fame quickly spread throughout Central Asia and beyond. Namangani made world headlines in 1999, 2000, and 2001 when his IMU guerilla units, made up of Tajik, Uzbek, and Arab guerrillas launched a bold series of military forays and ambush operations into the Batken region of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan's Fergana Valley.

Military analysts were surprised to discover that the IMU guerillas were well trained in Afghan terrorist camps and equipped with rifles with laser sniper scopes, night vision goggles, advanced communication equipment, rocket propelled grenades, and other powerful weaponry. It soon became apparent that Namangani's fighters had evolved from local boys fighting for their religious rights into something far more sinister.¹¹ It gradually emerged that the IMU had forged an alliance with Osama bin Laden, who was at that time extending his influence in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, and Namangani's struggle had been submerged into bin Laden's wider-ranging global *jihad*.

In what was ultimately a strategic miscalculation, Namangani (like the Taliban regime itself which allowed the Al-Qaeda to become a state within a state in Afghanistan) increasingly

¹¹ At this time an Islamist website entitled 'Jihad Land: Uzbekistan' run by Azzam publications which has links to Al Qaeda supporters proclaimed of the IMU's jihad: 'We are not fighting against Muslims and are not fighting against civilians. The president of Uzbekistan is a Zionist Jew and his army are communists who know what they are doing...The battle is clearly one of Islam versus *Kufr* (disbelief), and justice versus tyranny. Actually it is a battle of Islamic forces in Uzbekistan against a coalition of disbelieving nations backing Karimov. See <http://66.96.205.195/-azzam/html/landsmideastuzbekistan.htm>, but note that this site has been shut down on occasion by the US government since the commencement of the post-September 11 war on terrorism.

allowed his popular resistance movement against the corrupt dictatorship of Karimov's regime to be hijacked by the trans-national, anti-Western struggle of Al-Qaeda. Increasingly, Namangani's Arab and Uzbek fighters relied on Al-Qaeda for training and resources and became involved in the Taliban's desperate summer offenses against the stubborn Tajiks of the Northern Alliance.

In the final stage of this radicalization, Namangani was given command of Al-Qaeda's main fighting unit in Afghanistan, the hardened International 055 Brigade, on the eve of the Sept. 11, 2001 attack on the USA by an Al-Qaeda suicide squad. In the subsequent US-led, retaliatory destruction of the Taliban regime and the 055 Brigade at Mazar-i Sharif and Kunduz in northern Afghanistan (November 2001) Namangani and many of his Uzbek fighters were killed by US precision bombing (National Public Radio 2002).

Those who were not immediately killed fled to the mountains of eastern Afghanistan where US soldiers claimed to have killed 50 Uzbeks in the March 2002 Operation Anaconda. Other 'Al Qaeda Uzbek fighters' fled into the neighboring tribal regions of Pakistan where some were killed in deadly shootouts with Pakistani paramilitaries. An account of one such raid on Uzbek militants graphically described the following desperate last stand of these *jihadists* from Uzbekistan:

The Uzbek fugitives had heavy machine guns and an arsenal of rocket-propelled grenades piled up on their ramparts, but they held their fire for close to an hour, until a group of Pakistani soldiers smashed the gate and walked into the courtyard. Snipers promptly raked the soldiers with machine-gun fire...When cornered these people fight to the death (McGirk 2002).¹²

With US support, President Karimov has followed up this unexpected eradication of his IMU enemies by enacting further suppressions of the Wahhabi opposition in Uzbekistan and commencing efforts to create US-trained special force 'A-Teams' for combating Islamic militants. This brutal domestic policy is currently being carried out in the name of crushing 'international terrorism.' It remains to be seen whether this clamp down will be effective in the long run or create a backlash in the region.

Holy War in the Caucasus. The First Russo-Chechen War and the Emergence of Jihadism among the Chechens

Since Sept. 11th, Vladimir Putin has attempted to portray the Russian Federation's brutal war against Chechen rebels who are engaged in a historic battle for self-determination as a subplot to the US-led war on terrorism. Putin's ahistorical view of the war and his cynical depiction of the Chechen resistance as 'Al-Qaeda terrorists' overlooks the Chechen highlanders' century and a half long tradition of conflict with Russia that began long before the world became familiar with the name Osama bin Laden. During the course of this timeless conflict, the Chechens have experienced the scorched earth tactics of brutal Tsarist generals and total deportation at the hands of Stalin in 1944 (a largely overlooked tragedy that led to the death of one in three Chechens during a process that would today be called ethnic cleansing).¹³ Most recently the Chechens have undergone a post-Soviet policy of ethnic-based warfare and oppression against Russian 'citizens' of Chechen origin that can only be described as ethnocide.

Into this bloody national independence struggle, that has an ethnic dynamic and historic rhythm of its own, came small groups of Arab *mujahideen* who were moved to fight in a distant land most had never heard of when they viewed Islamist recruitment videos

¹² Uninformed sources in Afghanistan and Pakistan labelled all Russian speaking Al-Qaeda or 055 fighters 'Chechens.'

¹³ For an in-depth analysis of the overlooked role that the collective memory of this ethnic-based tragedy plays in the current conflict, see Williams (2000b).



depicting Chechen civilians being slaughtered by Russian Federation forces.¹⁴ While the small numbers of Arab fighters who made their way to Chechnya have been accused of 'hijacking' the Chechen war by those not familiar with the nuances of the conflict, the current Chechen war is essentially a continuation of a war for national self determination that flared up as soon as the USSR collapsed in 1991.

While this first Russo-Chechen War of 1994-96 was initially based on a Chechen national liberation struggle similar to the previous independence movements of the USSR's Baltic republics (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania), it later took on undertones of a *jihad*.¹⁵ As the hard pressed Chechen resistance fighters gradually realized that the West did not support them in their lopsided struggle for independence, they were only too willing to receive help from any source proffering military and financial assistance. The only source of aid for the beleaguered Chechen ethno-fighters at this time were Arab *mujahideen* trained in Afghanistan and Arab Wahhabi charities.

Many Arabs romanticized the Chechens' desperate struggle in much the same way that American volunteers in the Spanish Civil War of the 1930s had idealized that conflict. As the Russian Federation forces callously obliterated the Chechen capital of Grozny in an effort to subdue the rebels hiding in the city (turning a city of 400,000 into a wasteland known as the 'Caucasian Hiroshima' with hardly a murmur of protest from Western governments) Osama bin Laden and his militants began to see this uneven struggle for political independence as a conflict between Islam and Christianity.¹⁶

Chechnya soon became, along with several similar zones of conflict between Muslims and Orthodox Christians (such as Bosnia and Kosovo), a prime destination for Arab *jihadi* volunteers who gradually radicalized the local Islam in Chechnya just as they had in Indian controlled Kashmir in the early 1990s. Most of the trans-national Islamic fighters who joined the Chechen guerillas espoused a strict form of Wahhabi fundamentalist Islam. These volunteers saw themselves as holy warriors charged with the holy task of not only defending the outgunned Chechen Muslims from Russian infidel aggression, but of purifying the wayward local *Sufi* Islam of its heretical practices.

Foremost among the Arab *jihadis* in Chechnya was a Saudi Arabian *mujahideen* veteran of the American-sponsored *jihad* against the Soviets in Afghanistan who went by the *nom de guerre* of Emir Khattab (his real name was Samer ben Saleh ben Abdallah al-Sweleim) (*Izvestiia* 1999: 1). Khattab arrived in Chechnya in 1995 under the protection of a legendary Chechen field commander named Shamil Basayev and soon used his previous experience in ambushing Soviet military columns in the earlier Afghan *jihad* to annihilate a Russian Federation division on a winding mountain road in southern Chechnya (Williams 2000a).

This spectacular, videotaped military success ensured Khattab's popularity among the outgunned Chechen fighters who respected the 'Black Arab' for his courage. Khattab taught the Chechens how to wage Afghan-style ambushes and guerrilla warfare as opposed to frontal Soviet-style combat and the ranks of his partisan platoons soon filled with idealistic young Chechen guerrilla fighters. In addition, his 'Islamic Battalion' was bolstered by the

¹⁴ The author was shown some of these videos at the extremist Finnsbury Park Mosque in London and they were harrowing in their depiction of maimed and slaughtered Chechen civilians, Russian forces committing atrocities etc. In addition, Osama bin Laden called on the 'sons of Arabia' to carry out defensive *jihad*s in places like Chechnya and Bosnia in his Declaration of Jihad against the Americans (Kepel 2002: 319).

¹⁵ For an in-depth analysis of this largely overlooked second conflict, see Williams (2001b).

¹⁶ The horrific destruction of Grozny is clearly visible in satellite photos taken before and after the obliteration of this city. For photographs from space which reveal the destruction see: <http://www.freechechnya.org>.

arrival of Arab volunteers who took great risks sneaking into the Russian-occupied republic to join the out-gunned rebels in their desperate struggle against the odds.¹⁷

Chechens in the Islamic *cemaats* (platoons) began to wear Wahhabi-style beards, to outlaw alcohol, and to construct the Russian opponents they had once shared a Communist homeland with as *kafirs* (infidels). As the war progressed, many previously-secular Chechen fighters also began to wear headbands inscribed with the Arabic words '*Allahu Akbar*' (God is Great). In essence, Khattab's Arab holy fighters began to successfully graft the concept of *jihad* onto the secular, Sovietized Chechens' independence struggle. What had started out as a secessionist war for independence led by a nationalist Chechen general named Djohar Dudayev (who not only spoke better Russian than Chechen but had been a Soviet airforce general who earned his command fighting *against* the *mujahideen* in Afghanistan in the 1980s), began to morph into a Kashmir-style *jihad* against powerful occupying forces.

When the war ended successfully for the Chechens in 1996 (resulting in *de facto* Chechen independence and the withdrawal of Russian forces), the Arab Wahhabis capitalized on this hard-earned foothold among certain Chechen radical fighters to extend their political and religious influence in the newly independent republic.

The Wahhabis used their considerable funds to undermine local religious authorities (including the Mufti-Head Cleric of Chechnya, Akhmed Kadyrov, who is a Sufi) and to combat the influence of the moderate political leaders among the Chechens. On occasion, secular nationalist Chechen field commanders, such as the notorious Yamadiyev brothers, responded by clashing with the overbearing Wahhabi fighters who made themselves as unwelcome among *Sufi*-moderates in Chechnya as the swaggering Arabs of the 055 Brigade had among the average people of Afghanistan.¹⁸

It is interesting to compare this situation to that found in another Muslim province fighting for autonomy from Orthodox Christians at this time, namely the Muslim Albanian-dominated Yugoslav province of Kosovo. The contrast between the situation in Chechnya, which had been totally abandoned by the West, and secessionist Kosovo, which was protected by NATO, could not have been more glaring.

Arab volunteer militants, for example, tried to similarly graft the concept of *jihad* to the Albanian Kosovo Liberation Army's struggle against the Orthodox Serbs in 1999 and to spread their Wahhabi beliefs among the *Sufi* Albanians of Kosovo. In contrast to the diplomatically isolated Chechens, however, the Muslim fighters of the KLA were able to rely on NATO air support in their struggle and adamantly rejected links to Arab militants. The moderate Kosovar Albanians expelled or betrayed Arab militants who came to Kosovo with the aim of Islamizing ethnic conflicts in these former Yugoslav lands.¹⁹ KLA fighters I interviewed in the spring of 2001 in Kosovo and Macedonia were overwhelmingly secular nationalists who were conscious of the fact that their miraculous, almost over night

¹⁷ For a harrowing account of an American Muslim *jihadi* who 'shed his blood' in defense of the Chechens, see Collins (2002).

¹⁸ During the spring of 2001 the author visited a Sufi *Pir* (Master) in Prizren Kosovo who, while demonstrating the swords and needles his adepts used in *Sufi* ceremonies involving the piercing of cheeks, proclaimed that the Kosovar Albanians worshipped at both Orthodox Christian and Muslim shrines.

¹⁹ Islamic extremists I interviewed at Abu Hamza al-Masri's radical Finnsbury Park Mosque in London in August 2002 bitterly recalled the betrayal of a group of Arab fighters sent to Kosovo with funding from their mosque at the hands of the very Albanians they had come to defend. They also resented the expulsion of Arab *jihadis* from Bosnia following the Dayton Peace Accords and arrival of American troops in Bosnia.



success against Milosevic's powerful army was due *solely* to the fact that NATO had come to their aid in the spring of 1999.²⁰

With no hope for Western financial assistance or moral support forthcoming from the West (much less direct military support!), the impoverished and isolated Chechens by contrast found it harder to resist the influence of wealthy Wahhabi NGOs (such as the *Joint Committee for the Relief of Kosovo and Chechnya* or *El Haramain* headed by a full time representative in Chechnya named Sheikh Abu Omar) and well funded Arab militants. As the Soviets had previously done in Afghanistan in the early 1990s, the Russian Federation's brutal military actions in the mid-1990s combined with appalling myopia/disengagement on the part of the West to create the ideal conditions for the spread of Islamic-Wahhabi radicalism in war torn Chechnya.

It can therefore, be safely argued that, despite its shrill claims to be combating 'Islamic terrorism' in the Caucasus, the bloody Russian invasion of Chechnya actually created the very conditions that led to the intervention of international Islamists among the Chechens. This 'blowback' process unfolded in Chechnya in much the same way that the CIA and Soviets' earlier shortsighted actions combined in Afghanistan to create the optimal conditions for the rise of the Taliban and Al-Qaeda. As in post-Soviet Afghanistan, the horrific destruction wreaked on Chechen society by the Russian invasion of 1994-6 (from 45,000-50,000 inhabitants of Chechnya were estimated to have been killed in the conflict, many villages were destroyed, and most Chechens were jobless), planted the bitter seeds of resentment and despair. These seeds would eventually sprout and lead to the rise of Islamic militancy in a region that was previously known for its accommodating Sufi version of Islam.

As the Arab Wahhabis had done in previous locales known for their moderate Islam, from Indonesia to Bosnia, the fundamentalists operating in the lawless regions of Chechnya actively sponsored the radicalization of Islam in the northern Caucasus every step of the way. After the 1994-96 Russo-Chechen war, for example, a wealthy Jordanian Arab veteran of the Afghan conflict, Sheikh Muhammad Fatih, established Islamic boarding schools for orphans in the Chechen town of Urus Martan and began distributing funds for Wahhabi missionary activities. At this time, Wahhabi-funded fundamentalist mosques were also built in Urus Martan and Chechnya's second largest town, Gudermes.

This effort at fundamentalist proselytizing was paralleled by the recruitment of disenfranchised young men to join Islamic fighting units in a process that resembled Juma Numangani's recruitment drives in the impoverished Fergana Valley. It should be mentioned that Emir Khattab also established training camps in the region of Serzhen Yurt in the mountains of southeastern Chechnya to train young Muslim men from throughout this multi-ethnic region in the principles of Wahhabi Islam and *jihad*. In 45 day training sessions Muslim Uzbeks, Avars, Balkars, Kabardinians, Chechens, Arabs etc. learned how to fire the Chechen 'atom bomb' (the lethal RPG-7 Rocket Propelled Grenade), how to lay mines, fire Kalishnikovs, and how to worship Allah in the Wahhabi fashion.

In addition, an increasingly powerful coalition of Arab *mujahideen*, local Chechen fundamentalist opposition politicians, and militant Chechen warlords receiving Wahhabi funding, subsequently pressured the weak, secular Chechen authorities to implement *shariah* law in the newly independent Chechen republic. This led to the horrific televised execution of two criminals by local Islamic courts and the closing down of stalls selling

²⁰ Since the conclusion of the war, however, Saudi charities such as the *Joint Committee for the Relief of Kosovo and Chechnya* have been active in the UN protectorate of Kosovo trying to disseminate their Wahhabi version of Islam to Kosovar Albanian *Sufis*. In return for vital aid to impoverished Kosovar Albanians, the Wahhabis are striving to separate boys from girls in schools, open Wahhabi *madrasas* and mosques, and close local *Sufi* shrines (Blumi 2002: 9).

alcohol throughout the republic. Ominously, it also led to a series of congresses held by Wahhabis from Chechnya and the neighboring republic of Dagestan (a Muslim province still within the Russian Federation) calling for the overthrow of secular authorities in *both* republics.²¹

As Wahhabi influence spread in Chechnya and the neighboring Muslim Russian republic of Dagestan, the armed fundamentalist radicals began to attempt to force the traditionally free women of the North Caucasus (some of whom were former rebel fighters) to wear veils or *hijabs* and to outlaw traditional *Sufi* practices as they had done in Kashmir, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Afghanistan.

The increasingly prominent role of the Wahhabis soon caused a major rift between the vast majority of moderate Chechens and Dagestanis (most of whom belonged to two ancient *Sufi* brotherhoods of the Naqshbandi and Qadiriya orders) and the Wahhabi militants. It soon became apparent that the Wahhabi extremists' ultimate goal in the Caucasus was similar to that of the IMU in Uzbekistan. The Chechen and Arab Islamists aimed to unite with Muslim fundamentalist radicals in the neighboring Russian Federation republic of Dagestan and recreate a legendary 19th century *shariah*-based *Imamate* (theocracy) of the great anti-Russian *Gazi* (Holy Warrior) Imam Shamil (Williams 2000c).

It is not surprising that Chechnya's moderate president, Aslan Mashkhadov (who was popularly elected by the Chechen people in 1997), and those secularists around him, including the *Mufti* (Chief Cleric) of Chechnya, Akhmad Kadyrov, considered the attempts on the part of the Wahhabi 'foreigners' to create an alien Arab-style fundamentalist theocracy in the Caucasus to be a threat to their moderate *Sufi* traditions. *In 1999 Chechen President Mashkadov even called on Russia to help him expel the Islamic Wahhabi extremists from his increasingly chaos-ridden statelet.*

But the calls of Chechnya's secular authorities for help in combating the Arab or indigenous militants and kidnapping gangs struck a deaf ear among those in the Kremlin and FSB (heir to the KGB). Moscow was only too happy to see the weakening of the moderates and subsequent destabilization of independent Chechnya-Ichkeria at the hand of extremist Islamic warlords (thus making a mockery of Russia's claims to be fighting 'global Islamic terrorism' in Chechnya.)

As the Wahhabis began to extend their influence at the expense of *Sufi* and clan leaders among the Chechens, it became apparent that many in the extremists' ranks saw Chechnya as a 'Caucasian Afghanistan', that is a springboard for spreading their version of Islam throughout the region. The Chechen nationalists, who saw this movement as a threat to their traditional way of life and independence, armed themselves for an inevitable showdown with the Islamic radicals.

Those familiar with the Caucasus sensed that war was in the air in the summer of 1999 as the Wahhabi 'Che Guevera,' Khattab, continued his minor attacks on Russian infidel troops in neighboring Dagestan. Few could have predicted the horrific path that events would take that warm Autumn as the peoples of the northern Caucasus watched the storm clouds gather in the neighboring Russian republic of Dagestan.

Putin's 'War on Islamic Terrorism.' The Second Russo-Chechen War since 1999

It became increasingly obvious to Moscow and the Chechen central authorities that the extremists in Chechnya were itching for a further chance to humiliate the Russian 'infidels' who had withdrawn so ignominiously from Chechnya in 1996. With no jobs and an

²¹ At this time Islamists in Dagestan and Chechnya created the short-lived *Congress of the Peoples of Chechnya and Dagestan* which was strangely declared a terrorist group by the US State Dept. in Feb. 2003, long after it had been disbanded.



overabundance of weapons, many young Chechen men who had lost loved ones in the first Russian invasion offered the perfect embittered recruits for Arab militants who created well-armed military formations in Al-Qaeda style camps in the hills of Chechnya. As the Russian army carried out threatening war exercises on the plains north of Chechnya, Muslims in radical circles in the Middle East and Europe predicted a second conflict in the mountains of Chechnya. The cold war with Russia, they predicted, would soon become a hot *jihad*.

In August 2002 I interviewed the notorious *Imam* of the Finnsbury Park Mosque in London, Abu Hamza al Masri, (a fiery cleric who has led the radical mosque who recruited Richard Reid the Al-Qaeda 'shoe bomber', the '20th Sept. 11th hijacker' Zaccarias Moussaoui, and several Arab fighters who fought in the Chechen *mujahideen* 'battalion'). This source informed me that several volunteers fighters in Chechnya from his mosque had sworn to support those waging *jihad* against the Russian infidel regardless of whether Moscow was occupying Chechnya or not. There were certain elements in Caucasus with ties to radicals such as Abu Hamza who certainly felt that the victory in Chechnya was only the first step.

Many ordinary, war-weary Chechens who dreamed of establishing a secular *national* state, on the other hand, feared that the Wahhabi extremists who had a vision like that of Abu Hamza's would give Russia a pretext to once again invade Chechnya and deprive them of their hard won independence. Moderate Chechen President, Aslan Maskhadov, for example, complained that Arab fighters in his republic (including Khattab whom he tried to have driven out of Chechnya) were intent on 'flying the green flag of Islam over the Kremlin itself.' (*Gazeta Wyborcza* 1999: 3)

Most analysts feel that civil war between the Chechen moderates, headed by president Maskhadov and several *Sufi* sheikhs on the one hand, and the well-funded Wahhabis, led by militant field commanders Emir Khattab, Shamil Basayev, and Arbi Barayev on the other hand, was headed off only by a massive Russian invasion of Chechnya in the fall of 1999.

Sadly, before the moderate authorities of Chechnya could rebuild their tiny state and expel the Wahhabi fundamentalists, the Russian army launched a second massive invasion of Chechnya. This three pronged attack was to dwarf the previous Russian invasion of 1994-96 in its scale and intensity and to see the destruction of all Chechnya's rebuilding progress since 1996.

As many average Chechens had feared, the commencement of a bloody second Russo-Chechen War in 1999 came as a result of the activities of the Wahhabi fundamentalists in Chechnya who increasingly began to forge links with Wahhabis in the neighboring Muslim republic of Dagestan (an autonomous republic within the Russian Federation which separates landlocked Chechnya from the Caspian Sea).

The rise of fundamentalism in multi-ethnic Dagestan (which translates to 'Land of Mountains') began in the late 1980s and early 1990s as Wahhabis began to open mosques and fundamentalist *madrasas* in this mountainous region with funding from Wahhabi groups in the Arab world (Bobrovnikov 2001). A group of these Wahhabis in central Dagestan went on to clash with local *Sufi* Muslims who resented the increasing intrusion of this alien form of Islam in the late 1990s.

As the local Dagestani authorities began to suppress this 'foreign religious sect,' the heavily armed Dagestani Wahhabis responded by declaring their towns in central Dagestan an independent *shariah-zone*. In 1998 the Wahhabis, headed by a firebrand, Bagauddin Kebedov, who resembled the IMU's Tohir Yoldeshev, declared a holy war against Dagestan's 'unbelieving secular government' and began to arm their enclave with support from Khattab's militants in Chechnya.

The Dagestani authorities, who had a reputation for nepotism and corruption rivaled only by Uzbekistan's Karimov leadership, reacted to this challenge by calling in Russian Federation forces to suppress the Wahhabis in August 1999. The Russian army responded to the request by launching an aerial blitz on the Wahhabi Shariah zone. The Russian Federation's military actions against fundamentalists, who have been labeled 'Wahhabi zombies' by Russia's official Muslim establishment, included the use of deadly vacuum bombs (fuel air explosives similar to napalm). Russia's horrific bombing of the Dagestani fundamentalist villages of Chabanmakhi, Karamakhi, and Kadar resulted in the death of scores of innocent Wahhabi civilians (RIA Novosti 2003).

It came as a surprise to few that the heavily armed Wahhabi *jihadis* training in Chechnya under the command of Emir Khattab, (some of whom, including Khattab, were closely linked to the Wahhabis in Dagestan by marriage), responded to this assault on their 'brothers and sisters' by launching a full scale diversionary invasion of Dagestan with as many as 1,200 heavily armed fighters. Khattab's intent was to break through the lines of Russian Federation forces encircling the Wahhabi villages of central Dagestan and save the besieged fundamentalists from destruction.

As word of Khattab's invasion of Dagestan spread throughout a stunned Chechnya, thousands of ordinary Chechens rallied in Grozny to protest *against* the dangerous actions of Khattab's *jihadis*. Chechen President Maskhadov openly distanced himself from the extremists' incursion into Russian Dagestan and urgently called for talks with the Kremlin. *These actions on the part of the moderate Chechen majority were not, however, widely reported in the Russian news sources which informed the Western media of the 'Chechen terrorist invasion of Russia.'* As the rhetoric from the Kremlin became increasingly bellicose and racist, Maskhadov realized with horror that Khattab's rash actions had given the hawkish new Russian leader, Vladimir Putin, an excellent pretext to launch an all out invasion of the 'terrorist republic of Chechnya' with the stated aim of 'wiping out bandit formations.'

The second Russian invasion of Chechnya, which has cost thousands their lives, was thus launched in response to the reactionary invasion of the Russian republic of Dagestan by Khattab and Basayev's 'Islamic Peacekeeping Battalion' in August and September of 1999. *In essence, Moscow's second Russian quagmire in Chechnya was begun as a response to the joint military operations of a small number of Wahhabi radicals in the Russian republic of Dagestan and the breakaway statelet of Chechnya who hardly represented the vast majority of moderate Sufi Chechens.*

Since Khattab's Dagestani adventure and the Kremlin's subsequent invasion of Chechnya, a Russian occupation army of approximately 100,000 has tried with only limited success to 'eliminate terrorist bands' in Chechnya. Today the Russian Federation is engaged in a meat grinder conflict against Chechen guerrillas who have killed close to 5,000 Russian soldiers as of Feb. 2003. Most importantly, Russia's bloody military operations in Chechnya have brought the secular moderates led by Maskhadov together with the Wahhabi militants in an operational *modus vivendi* aimed at forcing the Russians to withdraw from Chechen lands.

While Khattab, who was considered a hero by many Chechens and Muslims throughout the world for his defense of the Chechen people during the Russian invasion, was subsequently killed by a mysterious poison in April 2002, his role as head of the foreign fighters in Chechnya was taken by a Saudi Arab veteran from Afghanistan named Abu al-Walid (Williams 2003). Saudi money for approximately 150-300 well-armed foreign fighters and their allies in Chechnya continues to flow from Wahhabi charities and this certainly contributes to the bloody conflict in Chechnya. Chechen fighters are provided bounties by



the Wahhabis for killing Russian soldiers, a lieutenant, for example, can bring in 500 dollars, and generals as much as 2000 dollars.

As the following interview with a Chechen makes clear, the Wahhabi-sponsored Islamic brigades have the funds to recruit young Chechens who are embittered by Russia's bloody assaults on their villages: 'Wahhabis offered young people something the official Maskhadov administration was powerless to provide. They gave them a steady income. It was blood money, of course, but who cared? If one person joined, he was issued a weapon and became a rank-and-file *mujahideen*...If you brought a group of people with you, you were issued a wireless kit, an off-road vehicle, and weapons for everyone...We were making an average of 100-300 dollars a month.' (IWPR 2002)

The common people of Chechnya, who dislike the Wahhabi extremists, have suffered tremendously from such extremism and the Russian occupation of their homeland. Many Chechens blame the Wahhabis and fundamentalist field commanders for the slaughter of their people and virtual destruction of their homeland by Russian Federation forces. A large portion of the Chechens led by the former *Mufti* (Chief Cleric) of Chechnya, Akhmed Kadyrov, and the Yamadiyev brothers (two warlords based in Chechnya's second largest city, Gudermes) have in fact gone over to the Russians in order to combat the influence of Wahhabi fundamentalism in their republic.

On the other hand, independence-minded Chechen moderates who have continued the struggle for freedom from the southern mountains, such as Chechen President Maskhadov, have been forced to make a deal with the powerful Arab and Chechen Wahhabi *jihadis*. This is largely due to the fact that the well funded Islamic *Cemaats* (Platoons) are useful in battling the Russian Federation forces. These Wahhabi radicals are not, however, under Maskhadov's control and often carry out bombings, assassinations, or ambushes of Russian forces without the consent of the secular Chechen government in hiding.

Sadly, a radical Wahhabi-jihadist fringe has, as a result, been widely depicted as 'hijacking' the ethno-national independence struggle of the Chechens. This has played directly into the hands of the Russian government which cynically seeks to depict *all* Chechen resistance fighters (including those of Maskhadov and his moderates who make up the bulk of the 'Army of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria') as Osama bin Laden-funded 'terrorists.' Thus Kremlin spokesman Sergei Yastrzhembsky was able to cynically declare in a January 2003 speech in Washington DC 'Today Russians and Americans have a common, insidious and ever-present enemy. Its name is international terrorism...there must be a recognition of the plain truth that the terrorist threat—no matter where it originates, Afghanistan, Chechnya, the Philippines or Pakistan—threatens us all.'²²

The moderate Chechens who favor negotiations with the Russians reject this glib linkage between their struggle and that of Osama bin Laden, a fundamentalist Saudi megalomaniac who has declared war on 'Zionists and Crusaders.' In a 2000 interview I carried out with Ilyas Akmadov, the moderate Chechen Foreign Minister, expressed his dislike of the Wahhabi fundamentalists and their Arab supporters while nonetheless acknowledging that they played an important role in the struggle against Russia. This source bitterly told me 'There are no Taliban Airlines flying fighters from Afghanistan to Chechnya as Putin would have the West believe. But there are Arab *mujhaideen* who have defined us as Muslims, not Chechens. They fight for their own reasons, but they operate outside the Chechen clan system.'²³

It would appear that the extremist *jihadis* are taking advantage of the Russians' clumsy search-and-destroy sweeping operations, known as *zachistkas* (cleansings), which target

²² See <http://www.inthenationalinterest.com/Articles/Vol2Issue4/Vol2Issue4Yastrzhembsky.html>.

²³ Interview with Ilyas Akhmadov . Feb. 2001. Deland, Florida.

villagers for extra-judicial killing and terrorize the bulk of moderate Chechens, to increase their influence among angry young Chechen men (and women who have appeared as suicide bombers).

As more Chechens become *shaheeds* (martyrs) as a result of Russia's brutal campaign to destroy 'international terrorism' in Chechnya, Russia's short-sighted actions will certainly lead to the further radicalization of Islam in Chechnya and increase the influence of the Wahhabi *jihadists* at the expense of the majority *Sufi* moderates. A 'blowback' effect with dangerous ramifications is in the process of unfolding in this volatile region.

The most recent manifestation of this radicalization has been the destruction of the Russian government's provisional headquarters in the heart of Grozny (the worst suicide bombing in Russian history, resulting in the death of approximately seventy-two on December 27, 2002). Russian officials accused Khattab's successor as head of the Arab *jihadi* units in Chechnya, Emir (Commander) Abu al-Walid, of being behind this deadly operation. It becomes increasingly obvious that Russia's slaughter of Chechens in the Caucasus will continue to attract trans-national *jihadis* who see Russia's crimes against humanity in this region as crimes against the *umma* (community of Islam).

Conclusions

The tragic events of Sept. 11th 2001 have shed light on the previously overlooked phenomenon of trans-national *jihadism* in Eurasia. In the process, Western intelligence agencies have begun to link a disparate variety of pre-existing *jihadi* battlefields in this ethnically diverse region to the new US-led war on fundamentalist terrorism.²⁴ In confronting this new global threat, US special-op forces have been rushed around the globe and tasked with a variety of anti-terrorism duties, often with little background understanding of the complexities on the ground in these ethnically diverse regions.

In prosecuting this global war, US Green Berets, for example, have participated in train-and-equip missions in the Republic of Georgia's Pankisi Gorge, Uzbekistan's deserts, and the jungles of the southern Philippine islands of Jolo and Basilan. US Special Forces are also operating in tribal zones in eastern Afghanistan, northern Yemen, and Iraqi Kurdistan.

If the US and its allies want to be successful in executing this broad-ranging campaign against international *jihadi* terrorism in a variety of lands that were, until recently, virtual *terra incognita*, it must develop a nuanced picture of the pre-existing ethno-religious conflicts in this region. *It must also strive to critically assess the degree to which the local struggles of these Eurasian ethnic groups have been overlapped by or co-opted by jihadism on a case by case basis.*

While it has been argued here that there are certainly irrefutable links between Al-Qaeda and some of the armed Islamic groups in this region (most notably the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and Harkat al-Mujahideen), the West must be cautious when confronted with the axiomatic statements of spokesmen in Moscow, Tashkent, New Delhi, or Dushanbe linking their governments' opponents to a nebulous Al-Qaeda style 'Islamic Terrorism Internationale.' In the case of Chechnya, for example, it is erroneous to see the

²⁴ Sadly the US government has demonstrated a shocking lack of mastery of events on the ground in this region on several occasions. For instance, in his Feb. 5, 2003 speech to the UN, US Secretary of State Colin Powell blithely attempted to link an Al Qaeda agent named Zargawi to not only Baathist-Socialist Iraq, but to the '*Chechens operating in the Pankisi Gorge in Georgia!*' Western intelligence services have also made wild accusations of links between Arab Al-Qaeda cells in London and Paris and 'Chechen ricin-poison labs' supposedly operating in the rugged mountains of the Caucasus. In addition, Western secret services seem to have swallowed the notion that scores of Chechens somehow made their way across Eurasia from their besieged enclave in Russia to fight for the Taliban in distant Afghanistan in the fall of 2001. This despite the fact that *not one Chechen has been captured in Afghanistan by coalition forces.*



on-going struggle for self-determination by the secessionist Chechen guerrillas as a subplot to Osama bin Laden's global *jihad* against 'Zionists and Crusaders.'

Most importantly, the West must also come up with new ways of understanding the phenomenon of young men from the Arab world who have become involved in Chechnya and other ethno-religious conflicts in this region as self-proclaimed 'holy warriors.' To portray all Wahhabi-funded militants operating in this region as 'Al-Qaeda operatives' is both to exaggerate the reach of this inchoate 'organization's' tendrils and to dehumanize individuals who partake in *jihad* for a broad variety of reasons. While these fighters may represent a threat to security in this multi-ethnic region with their calls for total *jihad* and the eradication of indigenous *Sufi* traditions, this does not make *ipso facto* them *bona fide* 'Al-Qaeda agents.'

All too often individual Muslim believers (for example, in Indian Kashmir or Uzbekistan) or entire Muslim ethnic groups (such as the Bosnians, Kosovar Albanians, and Chechens) have been targeted for real oppression in Eurasia. As a result, many devout Muslims in the Middle East continue to be genuinely moved to defend these members of the Islamic *umma* in 'defensive *jihads*' that have nothing to do with Osama bin Laden's struggle to expel US troops from Saudi Arabia and topple the moderate Arab regimes of the Gulf.

Khattab, the Arab head of the *jihadi* contingent in Chechnya and second most wanted man in Russia, embodied the new movement trans-national Islamic holy warriors who have not necessarily fought as 'Al-Qaeda agents.' This celebrated holy warrior hero/terrorist followed his conscience and fought to defend the *Dar al-Islam* from the plains of Afghanistan to the mountains of Chechnya before finally becoming a *shaheed* (martyr) in 2002. Just prior to his death, this veteran of scores of *jihadi* battlefields declared 'I am not a mercenary nor a terrorist...and not a hero. I am a Muslim, a simple *mujahid* who fights for the glory of Allah. Russia oppresses the Muslims; therefore I arrived to help free my brothers from the Russians. They fought against the Muslims in Bosnia, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan, as for me...I am simply aiding my brothers.' (Shermatova 2000: 409)

Tragically, the battlefields of Eurasia will continue to draw young Arabs who are maimed or killed fighting to defend those who they see as oppressed Muslim brothers and sisters. In the process, these idealistic or fanatical militants will continue to spearhead the dissemination of a form of puritanical militant Islam that first made its appearance in Muhammad ibn Saud's Arabia. In this new age of globalization and easy movement of ideas and peoples the trans-national Wahhabi *jihadi* warriors will continue to represent a global version of the 18th century *Ikhwan*-Brotherhood which first rode out of the deserts of central Arabia bringing fire and sword to those who threatened the Prophet's followers and dared to distort His message as they strictly interpreted it.

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