

**Islam in the Northern Caucasus**  
*Dagestan*

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Islam first entered and started to spread in the Northern Caucasian republics through Dagestan, which to this day remains the republic that is the most heavily influenced by Islamic teaching. Until the appearance of Islam, Avaria, the central and northern part of Dagestan, was home to the Georgian Orthodox Church, while the south was influenced by the Albanian Orthodox (Monophysite) Church.<sup>1</sup>

The first missionaries of Islam in the coastal part of Dagestan were the Arabs, who arrived in the mid 7<sup>th</sup> century. By the 10<sup>th</sup> century Islam had spread to southern Dagestan, and by the 15<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> centuries had reached its remaining regions, steadily pushing out all other religious beliefs. A number of Islamic clergy (ulema) formed in the Dagestani principalities and theological and legal literature became widespread. The traditional legal forms (adat) did survive despite the Islamic influence and often underpinned the rights of the local rulers. The struggle of the population against the despotic rule of the princes (shamkhals, khans and utsmiis) often took the form of a struggle for "pure Islamic law" (Sharia).<sup>2</sup>

At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this struggle took a new turn with the arrival of the teachings of the Bukhara Sufi sheikh Bagauddin Nakshband (1318-1389) in Dagestan. The appearance of the Nakshband brotherhood (tarikats) coincided with the strengthening Russian colonial movement in the Caucasus.<sup>3</sup> The structural elements of the Nakshband brotherhood became a foundation for the growth of the liberation movement of the highlanders, which saw its greatest moment during the rule of imam Shamil (1834-1859), who managed to create first in Dagestan and later in Chechnya, a Muslim state called an "imamat." In Russian historiography, this movement has been called "muridism" because in accordance with Sufi tradition the rebels called themselves "murids" [students] of their imam leaders.<sup>4</sup>

After the end of the war in 1861, the Russian administration of the Caucasus worked with the loyal members of the Muslim clergy, which firmly kept its role in education and justice. On the eve of the 1917 Revolution, Dagestan had over 1,700 small and 356 large mosques in addition to 766 madrasa schools that employed over 2,500 mullah-kadis.<sup>5</sup>

The Civil War of 1918-20 split the ranks of the Dagestani Muslims. One faction, led by sheikh Nazhmuddin Gotsinskii (the fifth imam of Dagestan), sided with the Volunteer Army of General A. Denikin, while the others supported the Bolsheviks, who treated Muslims with respect in the early years of Soviet rule.<sup>6</sup> By the latter half of the 1920's, however, Sharia courts and religious schools were closed, and the clergy (ulema) worked to counter the imposition of "the new lifestyle" among the highlanders, the atheistic propaganda of the Soviet state and later, the collectivization of the peasants. In the 1930's, during the course of the struggle with "anti-Soviet elements" in the republic, Islam was heavily persecuted, with many alims (men knowledgeable in Islam) being arrested and sent to the camps while mosques were closed and often destroyed.

Soviet religious policy liberalized during World War II. The Spiritual Board of Muslims of the Northern Caucasus (*Dukhovnoe upravlenie musulman Severnogo Kavkaza*, abbreviated as DUMSK in Russian) was created and some mosques were reopened.

Headed by a mufti and located in Buinaksk (formerly known as Temir-Khan-Shura, one of the largest Dagestani religious centers), DUMSK registered religious societies (dzhamaat), appointed and removed imams in the mosques and issued official decisions (fatwas) on a variety of religious issues. The activities of the Board were completely controlled by the Soviet authorities, specifically the KGB, which often used imams as informants. Along with other Muslim boards in the USSR, DUMSK officially declared its support for the "foreign and domestic policies of the Soviet state."<sup>7</sup> Dagestan played a key role within DUMSK, with most of the functioning mosques of the Northern Caucasus—27 of them by 1988—being located on Dagestani territory.<sup>8</sup> The high level of religiosity amongst the Dagestani population (especially in the highlands) contributed to a preservation of an informal, so-called "parallel" Islam in a variety of forms. These included the actions of Arabists and religious scholars who passed on their knowledge to the younger generations in underground madrasas, the veneration of holy sheikhs with pilgrimages to their graves, and the informal use of Sharia concepts of justice. By the 1970's a variety of religious literature started to spread in Dagestan, including the books and brochures of various Muslim fundamentalist ideologues including Hasan al-Banna, Al-Mawdudi and Yusuf al-Karadavi. In May 1989, the head of DUMSK, Mahmud Gekkiev, left his post under pressure from the Muslim community, having been accused of taking bribes, ignoring the norms of Islamic morality and cooperating with the KGB. This brought about the disintegration of DUMSK and the formation of individual Spiritual Boards in all the Northern Caucasian republics, including Dagestan.<sup>9</sup>

If the 1970's and 1980's saw a certain liveliness in the religious life of Dagestan, what happened in the 1990's can only be called a genuine religious renaissance. Across the entire republic, Muslim societies (dzhamaat) were reconstituted, mosques were built or repaired and madrasas, Muslim institutes and universities were opened.

In January 1990, a separate Muslim Spiritual Board was established in Dagestan, with Bagautdin Isaev, a Kumyk, elected as head and the organization moving from Buinaksk to Makhachkala in 1991. In 1990, 345 Dagestanis participated in the first mass hajj from the Soviet Union. The following year, the number of Dagestani pilgrims (khadjis) reached 900. Despite these successes, B. Isaev was criticized during the first general meeting of Dagestani Muslims for not being sufficiently attentive to the needs of certain communities or to the problem of training new imams. The mufti was also accused of not coordinating his activities with the Alim Union, interfering with the financial audit of the Spiritual Board and of trying to create a separate Spiritual Board for the Turkic-speaking, specifically Kumyk, population of the republic. It is rather obvious that such sharp criticism of Isaev was engendered by the fact that the Avars (the largest and most religiously devout ethnic group in Dagestan) were unhappy with a Kumyk being in charge of the Spiritual Board and sought to control it themselves. Isaev was removed and the Alim Council chosen by the meeting's delegates elected Avar Said-Ahmad Darbishgadzhiev, the rector of the Kizilyurt Muslim University, as head mufti. To this day, the Spiritual Board has been headed and controlled by the Avars, who (in accordance to the 2002 census) make up 29.4% of Dagestan's population. In the 1992-94 period, various ethnic groups tried to challenge the authority of the single Spiritual Board and create ethnically-based Kumyk, Dargin and Lak Boards.<sup>10</sup> These were all

unsuccessful, however, and in September 1994 the Spiritual Board of the Muslims of Dagestan (abbreviated as DUMD in Russian) was officially declared to be the only rightful organization representing the interests of all Dagestani Muslims.

The majority of Dagestan's Muslims espouse Islam in its traditional Sunni form as understood by the Shafii School. Sufism has been broadly embraced by the local culture and exists in Dagestan in the form of four tarikats—Nakshbandiya, Shaziliya, Dzhazuliya (a branch of the Shaziliya brotherhood) and Kadiriya.

During the Soviet period, the tarikats were prohibited and the Sufi sheikhs were either suppressed by the government or acted unofficially. For this reason, the act of permitting one's students to teach one's own tarikat (known as iznu or idzhaza) to others was also unofficial, with few, if any, witnesses being present at the iznu (idzhaza). In the 1990's, this led to a proliferation of sheikhs as well as mutual recriminations about the impropriety of the iznu (idzhaza) and the frequent accusation that one's opponent was not actually a proper sheikh.

Today, the most influential sheikh in Dagestan is the Avar Said-effendi Chirkeevskii, who was a simple shepherd before he became a sheikh. He teaches three tarikats—Nakshbandiya, Shaziliya and Dzhazuliya. His murids (followers, students and disciples) control the Spiritual Board of Muslims of Dagestan, Muslim radio and television programs and Muslim publications. While Said-effendi's followers come from different ethnic groups, the Avars are the noticeable majority. The intermingling of the Said-effendi virda (branch of teaching) with the Spiritual Board occurred in 1996 when the head of DUMD was the former dentist Said-Magomed Abubakrov. He was an extraordinary man and a talented orator and preacher. He managed to enhance the prestige of the Spiritual Board and turn it into a power independent of the authorities. He completed the "Avarization" of the Board leadership and of the Makhachkala mosques, both of which were previously held by Kumyks. If we remember that all this happened at a time when the political life of Dagestan was dominated by Dargins (the head of the Governing Council of the republic was Magomed-Ali Magomedov and the mayor of Makhachkala was Said Amirov), the Avars, having led Dagestan for the entirety of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century including the early 1990's, obtained control of the religious sphere of the republic as a form of compensation. At this time Abubakrov opposed the secular leadership of the republic and demanded that Islam be made the official religion of Dagestan and also decisively confronted the fundamentalist Muslim movement in the region (referred to in the Northern Caucasus as "wahhabite"). In August of 1998, the mufti's car was destroyed by a bomb in the yard near the central mosque of Makhachkala, killing Abubakrov instantly. His killers were never found, but there is evidence for suspecting the involvement of the republic's leadership. As former Secretary of the Dagestani Council for Security Mogmed Tolboev cautiously noted, the killing of the mufti was an attempt by "forces internal to the republic" to cause a collision between the Sufis and the fundamentalists.<sup>11</sup>

In the fall of 1998, Ahmad-khadji Abullaev was elected as the new head mufti of Dagestan. His authority is not as great as that of his predecessor, making him less

independent and much more obedient to the republic's leadership. DUMD is still essentially controlled by the followers of sheikh Said-effendi, but the new key figure, according to experts, is the father of slain mufti, Khasmagomed Abubakrov. DUMD is not able to control all of the communities in the republic and thus, has only relative authority. It has not been able to build a system of rigid obedience, and certain imams are completely beyond its control. The imam of each village is elected by its community (dzhamaat) and in accordance to Muslim traditions, DUMD is unable to interfere in this process. The spiritual board tries to play the same role in the republic that the Moscow Patriarchate does in Russia but does not always manage to do so, and its relations with the secular leadership of Dagestan are contradictory at best. DUMD leaders constantly declare that Islam does not differentiate between the secular and the spiritual and they do not deny the possibility of building an "Islamic state" in Dagestan, but speak of this in a formal way, underscoring that this is currently impossible because "the people are not ready." The conflict with the "wahhabites" forces the DUMD to act cautiously and support the secular authorities, all the while demanding that the rights of Muslim clergy be enlarged and that the financial aid rendered to it by the state be increased. Realistically, the Spiritual Board does not actually try so much as to create an "Islamic state" but to have Islam declared a privileged, de facto official religion in Dagestan. Concrete demands that have been made include the use of money from the republic's budget to finance the hajj to Mecca, making Friday a holiday and changing aspects of television broadcasting and the educational system. The Board consistently criticizes the leadership of Dagestan for being uncommitted to the struggle against the "wahhabites" and for extending a sort of tolerance to them.

It should be noted that despite everything that has been said above, Islam in Dagestan is actually quite pluralistic. Except for "wahhabism," the republic has a very powerful strain of alternative Sufi Islam unconnected to the Spiritual Board. Among the important Sufi teachers, one should note the Kumyk sheikh Muhammad-Amin Paraulkii who died in June of 1999 and nominated sheikh Muhammad-Mukhtar as his successor. The latter is also a Kumyk, lives in the village of Kiakhulai near Makhachkala and like his former teacher, is an adept of the Nakshbandiya tarikat.

A few words should be said about sheikh Tazhuddin Khasaviurtovskii (originally from the Andii village of Ashali). Tazhuddin has a great deal of authority, especially among the Ando-Tsezskii ethnic groups and has preached three tarikats—the Nakshbandiya, the Shaziliya and the Dzhazuliya. On July 31, 2000, I went to visit the sheikh along with his son, Ibrahim Tazhuddinov. The sheikh received us well though he was hard of hearing, blind and very ill. The sheikh's son translated my questions into the Andian language. The sheikh made a prayer (dua) over me, holding my hands in his own. Despite his advanced age, his hands were strong and warm, and I felt literally charged by energy afterwards.

This sheikh worked with his murids on an individual basis, with the sheikh and the murid pressing their knees into each other during prayer. Tazhuddin denied the concept of group prayer, demanding only quiet individual prayer. His followers mainly inhabit the Tsymadin, Botlikh, Akhvaks and Khasavyurt regions. After the death of sheikh

Tazhuddin on September 10, 2001, sheikh Muhammed, a Dargin from the Novyi Kostek village of the Khasavyurt region became his successor.<sup>12</sup>

The most famous sheikh of southern Dagestan is Sirazhuddin Tabasaranskii. He received his iznu in 1980 from the Nakshbandiya sheikh Abdulla, who had lived for 115 years and who was buried in Derbent in the late 1990's. Sirazhuddin has organized a set of madrasas across all of Tabasaran and has become a true spiritual leader of this region. He has also founded the Islamic University of Southern Dagestan, located in Derbent. On August 12-13, 2000, I was a guest of the sheikh in his home village of Khurik. A large prayer was held in his home on the 12<sup>th</sup>, during which "There is no god except Allah" was chanted repeatedly in Arabic. The prayer ritual was somewhat reminiscent of the New Age practice of rebirthing, or the kriyu technique in Hinduism (a combination meditation and breathing technique), or the written descriptions of a Khlysty (a type of Russian schismatic Christian group) prayer meeting.

Dagestan is also home to the murids of the Nakshbandiya sheikh Muhamad Nazim Kipriotskii, who lives in Lefka in Northern Cyprus and who is a the student of the Avar sheikh Abdallah Dagestani, who has lived most of his life in Syria.

Traditional Sufi Islam in Dagestan is primarily notable for its emphasis on spiritual values. It is non-aggressive and the notion of "jihad" is understood to mean the believer's own desire to perfect themselves. Murids tend to treat their sheikh the same way as ordinary Orthodox believers would treat their starets. It is reasonable to suppose that the close ties binding murids and sheikhs are one basis for the Dagestanis' tight attachment to their religious practices. It is unknown exactly what percentage of the Muslim population of Dagestan are religiously observant on a regular basis, but even if we were to assume that it is 20 to 30 percent of the population, that would place them far above the level of any religious observance in Russia. While the percentage of Sufi adherents is lower, it is apparently high enough to influence the formation of a particular spiritual culture typical of Dagestani Islam. As a field researcher who has worked in Dagestan over the last ten years, I have to say that except for Chechnya, this is the most religious republic in the Russian Federation. As of September 2003, the republic of Dagestan had the following officially registered institutions: 1,091 large mosques, 558 small mosques, 16 Islamic colleges and universities, 52 branch campuses of colleges, 141 madrasas and 324 mosque schools.<sup>13</sup> And all of this in a republic that according to the 2002 census has a population of 2,576,000 people, 94.4% of whom are Muslim (90.1% Sunni, 4.3% Shiite) and 4.7% Orthodox.<sup>14</sup>

The followers of Sufi Islam in Dagestan have several hundred holy sites and tombs (ziyarat or pir) at which prayers and thanksgiving rituals are held and charity is distributed. In the 1930's, part of these was abandoned, but by the 1990's, they were once more attracting a lot of attention. The tombs contain Arab fighters of the faith from the eighth to 11<sup>th</sup> centuries, missionaries from the 10<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, martyrs (shakhids) who died in battles with the "infidel" in the 8<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Sufis and Muslim scholars (alims) of the 13<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the innocently slain and also the nameless sheikhs whose names and deeds are forgotten. Followers of Sufism also make

pilgrimages to "holy" places of the pre-Islamic period that have been integrated into Muslim traditions—mountains, stones, springs and trees.<sup>15</sup>

In my opinion, the main element of Muslim life in Dagestan today is the conflict between the Sufis and the fundamentalists ("wahhabites") that first appeared in the early 1990's and has still not been resolved.

Any sort of discussion of Islamic fundamentalism, which first appeared in the Northern Caucasus in Dagestan, must surely go beyond the borders of this republic. Islamic fundamentalism in the Northern Caucasus is not essentially different from Islamic fundamentalism in other parts of the world. In the short term, it dates back to the second half of the 1980's, with its theoretical base coming from the classical fundamentalist works of Hasan al-Banna, Seida Kutba, Abu Al-Alia Mawdudi and their historical predecessors such as Ibn Teimiya, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab and others. By the mid-1990's, Dagestan became the ideological center of fundamentalism in the Northern Caucasus, while Chechnya became its testing ground.

Islamic fundamentalists in the Northern Caucasus are referred to as "wahhabites," though they do not like this term (for somewhat unclear reasons) and they prefer to call themselves "proponents of salafii" (a return to origins) or proponents of "pure Islam." Fundamentalists seek to renew Islam based on the Koran and the Sunnah, but deny all the historical layers of traditional Sunnite practice acquired over a thousand years of its history, making it improper to refer to them as "traditionalists."<sup>16</sup> They are especially hostile to Sufism, which has deep roots all across the Northern Caucasus and especially in Dagestan, Chechnya and Ingushetia. According to them, the presence of a sheikh or ustaz (instructor) as a mediator between God and man contradicts a basic tenet of the Muslim faith, and they vehemently deny the possibility of pilgrimage to "holy sites" (ziyarat) that has risen based on the Sufi tradition. Fundamentalists demand a shortened form of the service for the dead and believe that the time of the four classical Sunni schools (mashab) has passed, and that today it is possible to understand the Koran and the Sunnah through one unified school.<sup>17</sup>

All the main teachers and preachers of North Caucasian fundamentalism come from Dagestan, but just as with all other ideological movements, there is both a moderate and a radical wing. The leader of the moderate fundamentalists was the Avar Ahmad-kadi Akhtaev (1942-1998) from the village of Kudali, Dagestan. In 1990, during a council of the Muslims of the USSR in Astrakhan, Akhtaev was chosen as the head of the Islamic Renaissance Party. Later, he led the moderate fundamentalist organization "Al-Islamiya." He died at the age of 55 on the way to mosque in his own village, ostensibly of poison. Akhtaev was in favor of the peaceful dissemination of fundamentalist ideas and saw himself as a Muslim teacher and enlightener.<sup>18</sup> Many of his pupils are now young imams across the whole of the Northern Caucasus, from Dagestan to Karachaevo-Cherkessia. Like his ideological comrades across the world, Akhtaev thought "that Islam as an idea and a way of life was a deliberately chosen victim of 'the new world order.'"<sup>19</sup> At the same time, he tried to oppose this with the non-violent preaching of his views and

organized a madrasa in his home village of Kudali. Akhtaev also talked about the mutual complementarity of Islam and Orthodoxy in Russia as a Eurasian country.

The leader of the radical wing of the fundamentalists in the Northern Caucasus is Bagauddin Kebedov (born 1945 in the village of Vedenov).<sup>20</sup> In 1990 along with Akhtaev he was one of the founders of the Islamic Renaissance Party, which had a clear fundamentalist bent. In 1991 he founded a madrasa in the city of Kizilyurt near Makhachkala. Kebedov turned out to be a talented preacher and his audio and videocassettes in Avar and Russian were popular not only in Dagestan, but also far beyond its borders. Unlike Akhtaev, Kebedov was apparently always inclined towards work with the public and he quickly began work on creating an organization of radical Islamic fundamentalists that he called "Dzhamaat."

During my trip to Dagestan in the summer of 1997 I had the chance to meet Kebedov and hear his sermon in the mosque in Kizilyurt. Having become the emir (head) of the "Dzhamaat" organization by this point, he explained to me that the post-Communist government of Dagestan is currently in the state of "shirka" (heathenism or polytheism held be equal to unbelief). The registration of the mosques or communities of the fundamentalists is unnecessary. "We're already registered by Allah," he told me. "We don't want to hold power, we want Allah to hold power. Geographical and national boundaries have no meaning for us, we work where we can. Dagestan is currently ruled from Moscow, and we do not have an Islamic society analogous to that which exists in Chechnya. We would approve a full ban on the sale of alcohol if we could, but faith (uman) and monotheism (taukid) are more important to us. In an Islamic state we would like to have the institution of mukhtasibs (morality police), and we see the habit of smoking or drug use as haram (that which is proscribed)." I asked about the possibility of an independent Dagestan and Kebedov replied that he is in favor of an Islamic state and that this idea is key to him. The state of unbelief (kufr) is unacceptable for him, whether in a component part of the Russian Federation or in an independent Dagestan. These statements are sufficient to show the degree of his radical fundamentalist views. Unsurprisingly scholars refer to this approach as "political Islam."<sup>21</sup> During our meeting Kebedov repeatedly emphasized that Islam is a complete system for human life. As such, it must include ways for building "an Islamic society and a Muslim state."

The most successful attempt at this was undertaken by the villages of Karamakhi and Chabanmakhi of the Buinakh region of Dagestan. In 1997-1999, "Dzhamaat's" program was steadily realized. The ideology of the movement was accepted by the inhabitants, and the local Muslim community, the mosque of which was located in Karamakhi, became a small "wahhabite" republic, a bridgehead of fundamentalism in Dagestan (a sort of "independent Islamic territory"). Because of this, many young people from Dagestan and all the republics of the Northern Caucasus came there in order to seek out "pure Islam."

On August 20<sup>th</sup> 1998, Sergei Stepashin, who was at the time the minister of internal affairs of the Russian Federation, visited Karamakhi and Chabanmakhi and made a verbal agreement with the inhabitants that they may freely live in accordance with Sharia law<sup>22</sup>

as long as they comport themselves in a decent fashion and cooperate with the authorities of Dagestan in all other matters. Following this, the situation surrounding the two villages relaxed and their inhabitants started visiting various meetings in Makhachkala.

The community has a "Taliban" preparatory system. D.N., a graduate student in the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, studied under this system in July of 1999 while living in Karamakhi, and describes it in the following way.

It consisted of two stages. The first was the ideological preparation that included a study of the tenets of the faith, referred to as "improving the iman." This was needed since all those who take up weapons, and not just weapons, must do everything for Allah, and any man who has other goals will be severely punished on the day of judgment.

The second stage consisted of military training. A "brother" must know how to fight for Allah... We lived in the following way – we arose very early, at 2:30 am local time (officially the area was on Medina time, which is one hour behind the ordinary Dagestani time zone), made our ablutions, and at three we prayed. Afterwards we would study the Koran and memorize the suras (books). At six in the morning the physical training started, and we would run in the mountains for about six kilometers. As the "brothers" said "the mujahadeen is fed by his legs"<sup>23</sup> and "it's hard to run in the mountains, but when we descend and attack Makhachkala, we'll run like mountain gazelles." ... At the end of the course we had to take exams. Each "brother" had to memorize fifteen suras and be able to answer certain questions covered by the studies. The whole thing took three weeks. Only having completed this could we advance to the latter part – the military training that included hand to hand combat, firing different types of weapons ranging from a pistol to a howitzer, as well as battle tactics suitable in mountainous terrain.<sup>24</sup>

This rather extensive quote shows that the learning process among the radical fundamentalists is closely linked with military training. This approach is largely explainable in terms of the concept of jihad (holy war). The concept of jihad was formulated in the Koran:

Sura 2. Al-Baqarah. (The Cows)

Verse 190. And fight in the Way of Allah those who fight you, but transgress not the limits. Truly, Allah likes not the transgressors.

Verse 191. And kill them wherever you find them, and turn them out from where they have turned you out. And Al-Fitnah is worse than killing. And fight not with

them at al-Masjid-Al-Haram (the sanctuary at Mecca) Unless they (first) fight you there. But if they attack you, then kill them. Such is the recompense of the disbelievers.<sup>25</sup>

In analyzing this particular passage, Vladimir Soloviev, the famous Russian philosopher and scholar of religion, has correctly noted that "despite the harsh tone of the whole invocation, it is clear that for Muhammad holy war was a religio-political measure made necessary by circumstance, and not a continued religious principle."<sup>26</sup> Certain parts of this Koranic passage do allow it to be interpreted in a more radical and warlike fashion. Later, especially among the Sufis, the notion of "jihad" was spiritualized as the internal attempt to perfect oneself on the way to Allah. The notion of jihad was understood to come in four forms – the jihad of the sword, the jihad of the heart, the jihad of the tongue and the jihad of the arm,<sup>27</sup> and an attempt to return to the harshest possible idea of jihad had dangerous consequences.

At the time of the first Chechen war, Kebedov became convinced of the necessity of a "small jihad," meaning the participation in battles with the government's forces.<sup>28</sup> Later, while in Gudermes (Chechnya), which became home to the leaders of "Dzhamaat" at the end of 1997 after being pushed out of Dagestan by the authorities there (Kebedov referred to this as "the little hegira," following the example of the "big hegira" or Muhammad), the "Manifesto of 'Dzhamaat' to the Muslims of the world" was issued on January 25<sup>th</sup>, 1998. In this document, the relations between "Dzhamaat" and the pro-Russian leadership of Dagestan was termed to be that of "military opposition, with all possible consequences of this fact."<sup>29</sup>

It is true that there was some persecution of radical fundamentalists ("wahhabites") in Dagestan, but their response was always asymmetrical. Thus, in a confrontation between "wahhabites" and traditional Muslims in the village of Karamakhi on March 12-14<sup>th</sup>, 1997, the fundamentalists killed several of their opponents. On December 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1997, they attacked a Russian military unit in Buinaksk.<sup>30</sup> In 1997 the radicals also assailed Akhtaev, the leader of the moderate fundamentalists, accusing him of being ignorant in religious affairs, and they accused his followers of trying to frighten all opposition into silence.<sup>31</sup>

During the years of the first Chechen war (1994-96), the radicals acquired a military wing led by a Saudi emigrant known as Khattab.<sup>32</sup> He was born in 1969 in Arar in the northern part of the kingdom, and in 1987 he headed to Afghanistan, where he trained in the camps near Dzhelalabad and fought in Dzhelalabad, Khost and in the storming of Kabul. In the 1990's, Khattab participated in the Tajik civil war on the side of the Islamic rebels. Later, however, he refused to take part in the battles amongst the mujahadeen in Afghanistan, viewing the conflict as a fitnah (a troubled and confused time when brother kills brother). During these years, as Khattab revealed in one of his interviews, he met Osama bin Laden, who was not yet the head of al-Qaeda. Later, Khattab made his way to the Dagestani village of Karamakhi and married a local girl. In 1995, he moved to Chechnya and in August of that year his armed unit became part of the Central Front of the military forces of the Chechen republic of Ichkeria, commanded by Shamil Basayev.

The most famous operation of his unit was the April 1996 attack on the armored column of the 245<sup>th</sup> mechanized regiment near the village of Yarush-Mardu. Ninety-five government soldiers were killed.

Following the end of the first Chechen war, Khattab organized several military training camps in Chechnya, where Dagestanis and Chechens, as well as representatives of most Muslim ethnic groups of the Russian Federation, underwent military and terrorist training. His camps were located near the village of Serzhen-yurt and the lake Kezenoiam. In April of 2002, Khattab died while reading a poisoned letter passed to him by an FSB agent within his camp. His real name—Samir as-Suveilim—became known only after his death, since he always called himself Khattab because of the special respect he had for the second Righteous Caliph Omar ibn al-Khattab.<sup>33</sup>

By the start of 1999, radical fundamentalism became a major factor of the political instability in both Dagestan and Chechnya, with the radicals receiving sizable financial help from international Islamic organizations. Currently, the whole radical Islamic fundamentalist idea has become a revolutionary ideology that has in many ways replaced Marxism. Geidar Dzhamal, one of the most famous radical fundamentalist ideologues in Russia and one of the founders of the Islamic Renaissance Party of Russia, has noted that "today Islam functions not as a religion in the traditional secularist meaning of that term, but as an all-encompassing political ideology that seeks to defend the weak and the oppressed."<sup>34</sup>

In late spring of 1999, the Congress of the Peoples of Dagestan and Chechnya, an organization created by the "Dzhamaat" and a variety of other extremist groupings, declared Shamil Basayev the emir of the Liberation Army of the Northern Caucasus, and Khattab became his second in command. Starting in late May 1999 and continuing through July of the same year, combat was almost constant on the Dagestani-Chechen border. The radicals sought to find a weak place through which they could start an invasion of Dagestan, and finally found it in the Botlikh region, where part of the Avar population (the villages of the historic Tekhnutsal community) helped the mujahadeen, allowing them to occupy a series of villages in the region. This was declared to be the Islamic Republic of Dagestan, with Sirazhuddin Ramzanov, a relative of the late Akhtaev, named as prime minister.

The majority of the region's population was hostile to the invaders, with the Andian ethnic group, long an enemy of the Chechens because of conflicts over summer grazing, closing four mountain passes (including the important Kharami and Rikvani) to the radicals.<sup>35</sup> The mujahadeen were even unable to capture Botlikh, a strategic point that would open up the way into the valley of the Andian Koisu. The majority of the local inhabitants saw the jihad coming from Chechnya as a case of open Chechen aggression, and local volunteers fought alongside Russian governmental forces in trying to contain it. The inhabitants of four Andian villages—Andi, Gagatl, Rikvani, and Ashali—held village meetings and agreed to fight against the radicals. This was caused both by the Andians' adherence to traditional Sufi Islam and their total rejection of the "wahhabite" idea.<sup>36</sup> The women of Botlikh fed Russian soldiers the way they would feed their own

children, something not only impossible, but inconceivable during the first Chechen war. Having been defeated, the radicals were forced to retreat back to Chechnya, with most of the participants being Dagestani "wahhabites" and members of "Dzhamaat."

Emboldened by their success, Federal and Dagestani authorities undertook a punitive expedition against the "wahhabite republic" in the villages of Karamakhi and Chabanmakhi. The operation started on the night of the 28<sup>th</sup> to the 29<sup>th</sup> of August 1999, and after a two week siege both villages were almost completely destroyed and most of their inhabitants killed, though a core group of defenders headed by Dzharulla Radzhbaddinov managed to break through and escape into the surrounding forests.<sup>37</sup>

Shortly after the end of the Karamakhi operation, the villages were visited by a group from the "Memorial" human rights organization. One of them, A. Sokolov, wrote that the "'wahhabites' supporters within the rather affluent villages numbered around 10-20% of the population, with the rest of the inhabitants being adherents of traditional Islam. These people were defenseless before the united organization of the extremists, who were willing to use violence in order to realize their dogmatic religious vision."<sup>38</sup>

In my opinion, Sokolov is correct in referring to the "wahhabites," in this case the members of "Dzhamaat," as "religious schismatics." "Dzhamaat" has all the typical features of a totalitarian sect, and leaving the organization is entirely unsafe for any member brave enough to try since "Dzhamaat" keeps tight control over the unity and numbers of its members.<sup>39</sup>

In analyzing the actions of "Dzhamaat" in Karamakhi and Chabanmakhi, Sokolov writes that "by the summer of 1999 the 'wahhabites' came to completely control the life in these two villages. The Sharia court organized by the "wahhabites" used caning as a punishment both for the consumption of alcohol and also for participation in anti-wahhabite demonstrations in the capital of the republic. The same Sharia court, apparently on religious grounds, sentenced a man close to the leadership of "Dzhamaat" to 10 years of exile from the village as a punishment for murder."<sup>40</sup>

In the beginning of 1999, Basayev and Khattab invaded the Novolak region of Dagestan in order to help "Dzhamaat" in Karamakhi and Chabanmakhi. Their units rode in Kamaz trucks down the highway towards Khasavyurt and were stopped only five km from the city. Had they made it into Khasavyurt, the situation in Dagestan would have become critical, and defense trenches were already being dug around Makhachkala. In Khasavyurt, the mujahideen could have relied on the support of the Chechen-Akkin ethnic group, which makes up more than a third of the city's population, and evidence shows that most of the invaders of the Novolak region were actually Chechens. Once again, the attempt to start a jihad in Dagestan was perceived by most locals as an aggression organized by Chechen extremists.

In theory, the idea of jihad, or gazavat, as it is traditionally called in the Northern Caucasus, is not foreign to the Dagestani consciousness. It's quite alive among the Avars, but also the Dargins, the Laks, and the Chechen-Akkins. All of the preceding five imams

in the region, the most famous of whom was Shamil, were Avars. In a sense the Avars are unwilling to admit that a new imam could be a Chechen, and this was the role to which emir Shamil Basayev aspired. Basayev essentially made the idea of the immamat and the "Islamic state" unattractive and unheroic for the Dagestanis.

In September 1999, a law was passed officially prohibiting "wahhabism" on Dagestani territory, and hundreds of "wahhabites" were arrested. In the first years following the defeat of the August-September 1999, jihad the radical fundamentalist movement was seriously weakened and almost seemed to disappear. With time, however, various crises in the republic started to recur.

Corruption continued to destroy the authority of the local government. The "Death Squadrons" of the pro-Russian Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov started systematically terrorizing the inhabitants of the Khasavyurt region starting in 2003. All of this can probably explain the "wahhabite" movement's ability to recover from its losses and grow again. Armed bands of Islamic radicals are regularly seen near the environs of the Dagestani capital of Makhachkala today, especially in the thickets of Mount Tarki-tau that overlooks the city. This invariably leads to the question of why a crisis is once more starting to build, and why is the situation in the republic starting to be ever more tense and unpredictable?

It seems that in order to answer this question, we must remember that while remaining an administrative part of the Russian Federation, Dagestan is culturally part of the Muslim world. Islam had a strong influence here even during Soviet times, and in the post-Soviet period it has at least doubled. Since Sufi Islam was traditionally part of the republic's culture, the local authorities have financially and otherwise supported the cult of Sheikh Said-effendi from the 1990's to the present day. According to many Dagestanis, the sheikh is a puppet of the Dagestani government, a puppet created with the help of the security services. Starting in the 1990s, the republic's youth have become interested in so-called "wahhabism." Young people see this as an alternative way of life, one that denies the corrupt authority of the current ruling elite of Dagestan. More and more frequently, one sees young women wearing hijab in the streets of Makhachkala and young men join the bands of radical Muslim rebels.<sup>41</sup> The younger generations are angered by the lack of any social or economic future in the republic and the mass corruption of the republic's leadership, believing that radical Islam ("wahhabism") is capable of changing the situation for the better. Yasin Rasulov, a graduate student of the Dagestan State University, was a very noticeable proponent of "wahhabism" in recent years. As he puts it, the "invasion of Dagestan by the 'Islamic Army of the Caucasus,' (in August-September 1999) with the goal of establishing Sharia law, the destruction of the Sharia-based Kadar enclave (the Karamakhi and Chabanmakhi area) and the current punitive actions of the authorities against the supporters of 'wahhabism' are all the continuation of the history of opposition between Russian authorities and armed Islamic rebels in the Northern Caucasus. The cooperation of the officially-loyal clergy with the authorities and with the Ministry of Internal Affairs is completely logical within the framework of this tradition, which is being continued by today's Russia."<sup>42</sup>

Yasin Rasulov was killed on October 12<sup>th</sup>, 2005 in Makhachkala in the course of one of the operations conducted regularly by the Dagestani Ministry of Internal Affairs.<sup>43</sup> Earlier, in July 2005, the leader of the Dagestani organization "Shariat" Rasul Makasharipov was also slain in Makhachkala, and today the military wing of the organization is headed by Rappani Khalilov. His units make up the Dagestan Front in the unified armed resistance of the Northern Caucasus, which is headed by the president of the Chechen republic of Ichkeria Dokku Umarov. This does not mean, however, that the Dagestani "wahhabite" units are merely a branch of the Chechens, but instead we are seeing a network-type association based on common interest.

In 2005, especially in the spring and summer, the "wahhabite" rebels of Dagestan became quite active, killing policemen, blowing up trains, and even assassinating certain ministers. The assassination attempt against the Minister of Internal Affairs of Dagestan A. Magomedtagirov and the killing of the district attorney of Buinaksk B. Bitarov (which occurred on the Tolgin highway near Makhachkala on August 8<sup>th</sup>, 2006) are evidence of a well developed armed underground. The question then arises—what is the future of such a movement? Can it bring down the regime currently in existence in Dagestan or become a long running destabilizing factor similar to the guerrilla movements of Latin America? While this is a difficult question to answer, it seems to me that the latter possibility is more likely. What is clear, however, is that "political Islam" is becoming more and more important in the Northern Caucasus, and it is unlikely that it can be stopped using only police measures. The tension would probably be lessened by an open dialogue among the republic's Muslim groups, and the honest admission by the republic's Spiritual Board of the fact that Dagestani Muslims hold a plurality of religious opinions.

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<sup>1</sup> For more on the early Christian history of Dagestan see Takhnaeva, Patimat. The Christian culture of Avaria in the middle ages within the context of reconstructing political history. V-XVI centuries. Makhachkala, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> See Bobrovnikov, Vladimir. "Dagestan." Islam in the territories of the former Russian Empire. An encyclopedic dictionary. Vol. 1, 30-31.

<sup>3</sup> See Zelkina, Anna. In Quest for God and Freedom. 2000. 100-120.

<sup>4</sup> See Kazem-bek, M. Muridism and Shamil. Makhachkala, 1990.

<sup>5</sup> According to the Committee of Religious Affairs of the republic of Dagestan.

<sup>6</sup> See Donogo, Khadji Murad. Nazhmuddin Gotsinskii. Socio-political struggles in Dagestan during the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Makhachkala, 2005.

<sup>7</sup> Contemporary religious life in Russia. An attempt at a systematic description. Ed. Burdo, M. and Filatova, S.B., 2005. Vol. 3. 135

<sup>8</sup> According to the Committee of Religious Affairs of the republic of Dagestan.

<sup>9</sup> Contemporary religious life in Russia. Vol. 3. 136.

<sup>10</sup> Bobrovnikov. 31-32.

<sup>11</sup> "Blagovest-info," #34, 1998.

<sup>12</sup> I was kindly given this information by the by son of the lake sheikh, Ibrahim Tazhuddinov.

<sup>13</sup> According to the Committee of Religious Affairs of the republic of Dagestan.

<sup>14</sup> This information was kindly provided to me by two experts on Dagestan - V. Bobrovnikov and E. Kisriev.

<sup>15</sup> Bobrovnikov. 31.

<sup>16</sup> Bobrovnikov. 32.

<sup>17</sup> A conversation with the imam of a Vladikavkaz mosque, July 2001.

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- <sup>18</sup> "Znamia Islama," ("The banner of Islam") #1(10), Makhachkala, 12/1998. 3.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>20</sup> Bobrovnikov, V. and Yarlukapov, A. "'Wahhabites" of the Northern Caucasus." Islam on the territory of the former Russian Empire. 1999. Vol.2. 20.
- <sup>21</sup> See Nazih Ayubi. Political Islam. London, Routledge, 1991; and Landa, Robert Political Islam – some preliminary conclusions., (Politicheskii Islam: predvaritelnyi itogi.) 2005.
- <sup>22</sup> In everyday conversation "shariat," that is sharia, is the title given to Muslim law in the Northern Caucasus. In Muslim theology, however, sharia indicates "The Divine Law," out of which laws for Muslims actually flow.
- <sup>23</sup> A mujahadeen is he who has taken up jihad, or holy war. (Author's note.) The expression is an alteration of a well-known Russian saying - "the wolf is fed by his legs." (Translator's note.)
- <sup>24</sup> "Nezavisimaya Gazeta," 11/18/1999. 8.
- <sup>25</sup> al-Hilali, M.T. and Khan, M.M. Translations of the meanings of The Noble Qur'an in the English language. Medina. 36-37. Al-Fitnah: polytheism, to disbelieve after one has believed in Allah, or a trial or a calamity or an affliction. The author uses a Russian translation by Soloviev (see below) for the Koranic passage.
- <sup>26</sup> Soloviev, V.S. Muhammad. His life and religious teaching. (Magomet. Ego zhizn and religioznoye uchenie.) St. Petersburg, 1902. 60. The author's Russian translation of the Koranic passage is also drawn from this work.
- <sup>27</sup> Kushev, V. and Piotrovskii, M. "Jihad," Islam (A short dictionary). Moscow, 1983. 50.
- <sup>28</sup> Bobrovnikov, V. and Yarlukapov, A. 21
- <sup>29</sup> Makarov, D.V. Official and unofficial Islam in Dagestan (Offitsialnyi i neoffitsialnyi Islam v Dagestane). Moscow, 2000. 42.
- <sup>30</sup> Makarov. 42.
- <sup>31</sup> "As-Salam." #18, September 1997.
- <sup>32</sup> It was popularly believed that Khattab was a Jordanian.
- <sup>33</sup> At the end of 2002 Khattab's older brother, Mansur as-Suveilim revealed to the media that Khattab's real name was Samir bin Salikh bin Abdalla bin Salikh bin Abdurrahman bin Ali as-Suveilim. In the fall of 1996, after Russian troops left Chechnya after the first war Khattab received a medal for bravery and heroism from the Chechen government and received the rank of brigadier-general. "Al-Khaiat" newspaper (an international Arabic newspaper financed by Saudi Arabia), 04/29/02 and 05/01/02.
- <sup>34</sup> "Moscow Times." 11/16/01.
- <sup>35</sup> This information was kindly provided to me by prof. M.A. Aglarov who was in the Botlikh region during this time.
- <sup>36</sup> This information was also provided by prof. M.A. Aglarov, who is an ethnic Andian.
- <sup>37</sup> Author's field journal.
- <sup>38</sup> Sokolov, A. "What should we do if the tail wags the dog in the wrong direction?" "Express-khronika." #39/594/25. 4.
- <sup>39</sup> Author's field journal.
- <sup>40</sup> Sokolov. 4.
- <sup>41</sup> Roshchin, M. "The 'Wahhabi' insurgents in Dagestan." Frontier. #10 (Autumn), 2005. 48-49.
- <sup>42</sup> Rasulov, Yasin. "The mirror of Caucasus' history."  
[http://www.chernovik.net/article.php?paper\\_id=35&article\\_mode=](http://www.chernovik.net/article.php?paper_id=35&article_mode=)
- <sup>43</sup> The role of Yasin (Makhach) Rasulov in the Dagestani "wahhabite" movement is not entirely clear. He was the most visible ideologue of "wahhabism" of the last several years, and he was noticeably better educated than his predecessors. It seems that he could have been a participant in the thoughtful intra-Muslim dialogue that is so necessary in today's Dagestan. It's uncertain how deeply involved he was in the armed resistance within the republic. There is evidence that he was killed on October 12<sup>th</sup>, 2005, though on April 11<sup>th</sup>, 2006 he was once more declared dead. It's interesting that the article in "Kommersant" about his second demise was entitled "Kontrolnaia smert ideologa "Shariata," (roughly meaning "The corroborating death of the ideologue of "Shariat.") The article stated that "Makhach Rasulov (Yasin), one of the ideologues of the wahhabite underground of Dagestan was killed yesterday in the course of an operation in Makhachkala... As later explained by the first deputy of the head of the Ministry of Internal Affairs division in the Southern Federal Region Sergei Solodnikov, the slain man turned out to be the famous religious extremist Makhach Rasulov, who signed his articles in the local newspapers with the name Yasin.

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Earlier he was known as a freelance writer for the republic's weekly "Novoye delo," where he authored a column about Islam. The local Ministry of Internal Affairs representatives say that Rasulov was the emir of Makhachkal and the successor to Rasul Makasharipov. Emir Rasulov was linked to more than a dozen serious crimes, most of which were assault or terrorist acts directed towards members of the security services." The complete article may be found at:

[http://www.rambler.ru/click?from=info&\\_URL=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.kommersant.ru](http://www.rambler.ru/click?from=info&_URL=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.kommersant.ru)

The title of the "Kommersant" article nicely underscores the potential dubiousness of the information provided. The whole issue is insufficiently clear, in my opinion, partially because it is customary to blame unsolved (so called "hanging") crimes on the dead.