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Will the Real Caucasus Emir Please Stand Up

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On Aug. 1, Chechen militant Doku Umarov — head of the Caucasus Emirate, an umbrella group loosely connecting rebels in the North Caucasus republics — announced his voluntary resignation and named Aslambek Vadalov, an obscure mid-ranking Chechen rebel, as his successor. According to the Russian media, the name of the third person appearing in the video remained unclear, but that person was a Jordanian known as Muhannad.

Muhannad, who was leader of the mujahedin in Chechnya, became deputy in 2007 to military emir Ali Taziyev, aka Magas. Muhannad is essentially the top al-Qaida representative in Chechnya. All the connections and financial assistance coming from abroad move through him, and it is surprising that the Federal Security Service — the only intelligence agency in the world that claims to have exposed al-Qaida agents operating secretly in Georgia — hardly ever mentions the name of Muhannad.

A few days after announcing his resignation, Umarov retracted his statement, calling it a

“fabrication,” and announced that he would remain head of the Caucasus Emirate. This indicates a complete breakdown in the communications and command structure of the emirate.

The situation apparently has gotten much worse after Russian security forces seized Magas — once the No. 2 man in the mujahedin hierarchy — in early June. The problem is so bad that the only method of communication remaining for Umarov is to post his messages on the Internet and then ask his subordinate emirs to post their responses. This is clearly not the best method for a chief and his subordinates to exchange important messages, and it raises serious questions about how the organization is managed.

Umarov’s decision to retract his statement was apparently linked to tensions among the mujahedin themselves. Vadalov is a former Chechen separatist. For some reason, Umarov and Muhannad placed their bets on the part of the mujahedin that fights for the independence of Chechnya, rather than for liberating the entire Caucasus from infidels. It seems that the decision upset the emirs of the other Caucasus regions so much that Umarov was forced to retract his resignation immediately.

History is filled with examples of rebellions in which military commanders overthrow their leaders, but you can count on one hand the number of rebellions during which commanders refused to accept the resignation of their chief. That type of situation only arises when the leader is a nominal head of a movement and has extremely weak powers. Umarov is no more the head of the Caucasus Emirate than Dmitry Medvedev is the president of Russia. This state of affairs suits the strong and independent emirs in the region, and they have no desire to change it.

This is not the first time that Umarov has retracted his own statements. It happened following the terrorist bombings in the Moscow metro as well. This is typical when you are talking about a paranoid, totalitarian ideology. A normal politician might find it unpleasant to have to say, “Sorry, I changed my mind,” but he will do it if it is absolutely necessary. Not so in a totalitarian ideology. As author George Orwell wrote in “1984,” “If we are at war with Oceania today, it means we have always been at war with Oceania, and anybody who speaks differently is an enemy of the people.”

Umarov has changed his mind about stepping down, and that means he never considered leaving in the first place. Therefore, the first video in which he announced his resignation was a fake.

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