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Dagestan Plans Anti-Terror Units, Worrying Locals

By Paul Goble

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Staunton ◙ In spite of the violent precedent of such units in Chechnya, President Dmitry Medvedev has vindicated calls by some in the North Caucasus republic of Dagestan for the creation of anti-terrorist and anti-extremist units staffed by local people. That is an indication of just how poorly the existing policing structures are performing and how powerful the threat from the militants has become.

At a meeting of the Dagestan Anti-Terrorist Commission on Aug. 9, Dagestan's president, Magomedsalam Magomedov, said the "low effectiveness" of the current struggle against terrorism and extremism is a serious issue and that Makhachkala needs to take new measures now.

About The Columnist

Paul Goble is a longtime specialist on ethnic and religious questions in Eurasia. Most recently,

he was director of research and publications at the Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy. He has served as vice dean for the social sciences and humanities at Audentes University in Tallinn and as a senior research associate at the EuroCollege of the University of Tartu in Estonia.

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Magomedov said that since the start of 2010, “more than 250 people” in the republic have suffered from attacks, which have been occurring in more locations throughout the republic than ever. “One must recognize that out responses and the actions of the force structures have not been as effective as we would like,” he continued.

Indeed, given “the growing activity of underground bands, the number of successfully conducted counter-terrorist operations that have liquidated or detained militants has become fewer than [the same figure] during the same period last year,” Magomedov said.

He told the commission that he had proposed to Moscow the creation of “special subunits” consisting of Dagestanis who will be "involved with questions of countering terrorists and extremists.

The regional president said that "at this stage, work is being conducted in the government of the Republic of Dagestan for the formation of a special fund to support these activities.”

In addition, it was indicated at the meeting by Magomedov that the responsibilities of these new units would include guarding Dagestan's critically important hydroelectric stations. There are seven major ones and four minor ones, and their security has been a major concern for Moscow officials, including Deputy Energy Minister Andrei Shishkin, who recently visited the republic.

According to an article published Aug. 13 in Kommersant, Magomedov is now saying Medvedev has “approved the creation in the republic of ‘a special subunit with no fewer than 800’” officers and men “for conducting special and military operations in the mountainous and forested areas” of Dagestan.

Dagestani First Deputy Prime Minister Rizvan Kurbanov is the person overseeing the local silovki, or military and other policing groups. He said the new units would consist of two to three battalions and would be more effective in “restoring order” ⊠ because “unlike the federals, they on their own territory, know all the mountain roads and pathways, and even by external signs can distinguish representatives of traditional Islam from extremism.”

That brand of profiling is exactly what worries some Dagestan watchers. However, Kurbanov insisted that no one “intends to copy the Chechen defenders of order” in Dagestan. Just one of the differences between Makhachkala's plans and Grozny's units, he said, is that the Dagestani units won't use any former militants in their ranks. Instead, they will use only those who are committed to the government side.

For this proposal to take off, Kommersant pointed out, there will have to be “a corresponding decree of the president” confirming “the composition, number and structure of the forces” and also defining their bases and relationship to existing Interior Ministry units in Dagestan.

Despite pledges that these new units won't repeat the behavior of the north and south battalions in Chechnya, many in Makhachkala and probably in Moscow are skeptical about this idea and oppose it. Magomed Shamilov, the head of an independent union of internal security and prosecutor workers in Dagestan, told Kommersant that he and his colleagues are “categorically against the creation of such battalions.”

Whatever people say now about the units' intentions, and whatever the units are called, he said, “these will be subunits that will be involved in the destruction of Dagestanis who ⊠ by fate or out of their own mistakes ⊠ turn out to be on ‘that side.’” In other words, Shamilov suggested, Dagestanis who aren't militants will be killed because people who claim they are, or because republic officials view them as enemies.

Religious Muslim groups are worried as well. According to one Islamic blog, Kurbanov’s certainty that Dagestanis will be able to distinguish “traditional” Muslims from “radical” ones likely means that any such new units will treat all those wearing a beard as Wahhabis by definition, a dangerous assumption indeed.

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