

Mixing Turncoats and Terrorism

By [Simon Saradzhyan](#)

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Events of one August day in Russia's volatile republic of Dagestan have once again highlighted how turncoats can enhance terrorists' capabilities to carry out deadly attacks in the North Caucasus and other regions of Russia.

On Aug. 28, Aminat Kurbanova, an ethnic Russian woman whose original name was Alla Saprykina, visited Said Afandi al-Chirkawi, the spiritual leader of two major Sufi orders in the North Caucasus. The prominent sheikh was initially reluctant to meet Kurbanova, but the 29-year-old woman said she was a Russian who wanted to convert to Islam, and he eventually agreed to receive her in his village home. In reality, this former actress and dancer had not only already converted to Islam, but had also joined the ranks of the believers in Salafism, the so-called pure Islam. Once in the same room with the sheikh, she detonated a bomb concealed under her clothes to kill him and seven others, including herself.

Russian law enforcement officials were aware that Kurbanova had been assisting militant Salafites and that she may have decided to become a shahid after her second husband was killed fighting. But they still could not intercept the woman during her deadly mission.

About 150,000 people showed up for the funeral of the sheikh, who had tens of thousands of followers. His death is likely to fuel tensions and perhaps incite violence between members of the Sufi orders and militant Salafites in the North Caucasus.

On the day Kurbanova blew herself up, another militant Salafite carried out a suicide attack in Dagestan. Ramazan Aliyev, a border guard, opened fire on colleagues and police at a barracks in Dagestan's Derbent district, killing seven before being shot to death himself.

Russia's border guard force is highly professional, and its members are screened more thoroughly than conscripts in the armed forces. Yet Aliyev, whose radical religious views had been reportedly known for years, was allowed to serve for years.

There have been dozens of documented cases in the North Caucasus when servicemen of Russia's so-called power agencies switch sides to assist terrorists, or when local militants infiltrate these agencies to facilitate deadly attacks.

It is also well known that a number of ethnic Slavs have converted to Islam and joined the North Caucasus-based groups, including suicide bombers Vitaly Razdobudko and his wife. It should be noted that Kurbanova's second husband, Magomed Ilyasov, helped to train the Razdobudkos for their suicide missions. Such converts could be especially dangerous because they have a better chance to successfully approach targets in Russia, as policemen tend to focus on dark-skinned non-Slavs in their racial profiling of terrorist suspects.

Terrorist attacks involving these kinds of converts and turncoats would be particularly difficult to repel, especially if the assailants are well-trained, equipped and prepared to die, believing that the reward for their "martyrdom" is paradise. Such attacks could prove particularly devastating if they are staged against critical infrastructure facilities such as nuclear power stations. Major catastrophes on the scale of Chernobyl or Fukushima could be repeated as a result of premeditated actions by terrorists who are assisted from sources within Russia if employees of the country's security services and critical facilities are not prepared to prevent such attacks.

The authorities must also take measures to prevent such attacks from being staged. Apart from addressing root causes and contributing factors behind the organized violence in the North Caucasus, preventive actions should include comprehensive screening of staff at power agencies and key infrastructure facilities to weed out insiders who could cooperate with terrorists to cause significant casualties and major social and economic disruptions.

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