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Caucasus Emirate Is a Growing Threat to Russia

By Gordon M. Hahn

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Some Russian officials have suggested that the Dec. 4 attack in Grozny, that killed 14 police and wounded 36, was orchestrated from abroad, specifically, by the Islamic State. To be sure, Russians occasionally exaggerate the role of foreign jihadists in attacks carried out by the notorious North Caucasus-based Caucasus Emirate. However, in this case, the Russian claim could well be accurate.

The attackers themselves issued a video stating that they had been sent by amir Hamzat, the top amir of the Caucasus Emirate's Chechnya network. They emphasized that they had taken the Islamic loyalty oath to the Caucasus Emirate's amir Ali Abu Muhammad al-Dagestani, previously amir of the Caucasus Emirate's Dagestan network — the most powerful of the four networks in the Caucasus.

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for many years.

However, the Caucasus Emirate is deeply embedded in the global jihadi revolutionary movement which the Islamic State and al-Qaida are fighting to lead. The Caucasus Emirate has been part of the global jihadi alliance for many years and its predecessor organization, the Chechen Republic of Ichkeriya, had ties to it for nearly two decades, though you would not know it from most Western media and think tank coverage.

Since the Caucasus Emirate's founding in October 2007 and the shift to a fully jihadist profile, group operatives have been caught recruiting, acquiring funds, and plotting attacks. At home in the Caucasus and elsewhere in Russia, including Moscow, Caucasus Emirate operatives have carried out 55 suicide bombings and nearly 3,000 attacks overall.

More recently, the Caucasus Emirate's capacity has been declining at home because since late 2011 its forces and recruiting pool have been drained by an exodus to Syria and now Iraq. Former Caucasus Emirate operatives are now amirs of numerous jihadi groups fighting under both the Islamic State and al-Qaida banners in the Levant.

The most infamous of these amirs is Tarkhan Batirashvili, nom de guerre Abu Umar al-Shishani. The Caucasus Emirate's previous amir, Dokku Umarov — poisoned to death by Russian intelligence in September 2013 — dispatched Batirashvili and several other group members to the Levant in early 2012 and initially financed their activity there, hoping to gain some control over the Caucasus emigre mujahedin there and ensure their return later.

All became amirs of Caucasus- or foreign-dominated brigades. Others they had commanded would become amirs of other jihadi groups. For example, Umarov's emissary to the Syrian mujahedin, Salahuddin Shishani, broke with Batirashvili and now heads a group often referred to as the Caucasus Emirate in the Levant.

In 2013 Batirashvili joined the Islamic State and quickly rose up its ranks, becoming the military amir of the group's northern front in the same year. He is said to have led the Islamic State's conquest of Anbar Province, which enabled amir Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi to declare the Islamic State or Caliphate, and some reports indicate Batirashvili may have been promoted be Islamic State's overall military amir.

Here, analysts may have confused Tarkhan with his elder brother Tamaz. Tarkhan has insisted repeatedly that he plans to return to the Caucasus and energize the Caucasus Emirate's jihad at some point.

Tamaz, according to their father, has always been the leader of the two. He is reported to be running the Islamic State's Syrian operations and to be an extremely secretive operative even as far as Islamic State leaders go. He is very likely running and funneling the funds that finance his brother's operations. Other important operatives, such as former amir Umarov's brothers, operate out of Turkey and reportedly help transport Caucasus Emirate fighters to and from Syria.

Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov — granted not always the most reliablve source — claimed that Umarov's brother Isa was involved in the Grozny attack.

Moreover, given the involvement of hundreds of Caucasus Emirate fighters in the Levant and the deaths of many hundreds, even thousands by now, Caucasus Emirate amir Dagestani has been deeply involved in the politics surrounding the conflict over control of the jihad in the Levant and globally. He recently issued a statement along with several of the global jihad's most prominent theo-ideologists, including Abu Muhammad Asem al-Maqdisi, calling on the Islamic State to use more moderate tactics and for a rapprochement between it and al-Qaida.

In sum, the Caucasus Emirate has deep ties and dark networks in both the Islamic State and al-Qaida in the Levant. Groups associated with either jihadi side could have provided financing and perhaps some fighters or other assistance for the Grozny attack.

Indeed, the Caucasus Emirate's Chechen network needs all the help it can get. Since 2011, the Chechen network has been the weakest or one of the weakest of the Caucasus Emirate's four core networks, depending on the year.

Last year it was the weakest, carrying out a mere 30 attacks. Caucasus Emirate amir Dagestani called for more large-scale attacks involving greater numbers of mujahedin in one of his first addresses as amir, but the Chechen network likely would have needed assistance to carry out an attack such as the one in Grozny.

It is certainly possible that the operation was purely a Caucasus Emirate operation, supported by the more robust Dagestani network. But make no mistake about it: The Caucasus Emirate is now a global jihadi group with networks in Russia, Europe, the Levant and elsewhere.

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