

## **Chechens Fear 'Wahhabi' Threat**

**Author:** [Umalt Dudayev](#)

As the war goes on, fundamentalist Islamists in Chechnya are becoming bolder and more violent.

Even for a society used to violent death, the murders of Said-Pasha Salekhov and his son by unidentified assailants in the village of Stariye Atagi, 20 km south of Grozny, caused extreme shock and revulsion.

Salekhov, aged 50, was a descendant of the ancient Arab tribe of Kureishi - to which Mohammed himself supposedly belonged - and was one of Chechnya's most respected religious leaders.

The locals blame the November 21 killings on militants they call Wahhabis - exponents of one of Islam's most belligerent movements - but few will admit this openly. People fear for their lives - and for good reason.

The pro-Moscow interior ministry in Grozny reports that since Russia began its current war in Chechnya three years ago, some 30 prominent religious figures and upwards of 200 regional and local government officials have died at the hands of Islamic militants in the republic. The only reason they were killed was that, at different times, they had had contact with Russian troops.

"We are caught between a rock and a hard place," admitted the deputy governor of one of Chechnya's municipalities, who did not want to be named. "The Russians don't trust us as they think we collaborate with the guerrillas. On the other hand, the Wahhabis are after us. As far as they are concerned, we are all traitors, or kafir [Arabic for apostate]."

Non-governmental organisations in Chechnya estimate that up to ten per cent of the population now supports the hardline Islamists. But nowadays, they can be harder to spot than before. "When the new war began in Chechnya, many Wahhabi militants shaved off their beards, bought themselves fake papers and dispersed among civilian population," said Magomed Bakhaev, deputy chief of police of the Urus-Martan district.

"Many of them have joined the regular police force, riot police and other interior ministry departments. There is a sprawling, powerful network of Wahhabi militants operating across Chechnya, which has hardly been affected by Russia's anti-extremism effort."

Bakhaev said the clandestine Wahhabi network recruits young Chechens into Jamaats - militant Islamic squads - supplies them with weapons and pays for undercover operations against Russian troops and Chechen officials.

"They are everywhere," he said. "They are watching for those Chechens who collaborate with Russian authorities, and make lists of local officials. Then the Sharia [Islamic law] court issues death sentences in absentia to those people, which is then carried out at the earliest opportunity."

The militants call themselves "fighters for pure Islam", reject all compromise, and say they are prepared to fight to the death.

Abdul-Hamid, 26, a jamaat fighter from Argun, said he had been wounded in the leg during his band's

recent raid on a Russian checkpoint near the town. He is currently staying with his relatives in Grozny and undergoing treatment.

"There is no mention of Wahhabi in the Holy Koran," he said. "This term was coined by enemies of Islam to smear the true fighters for the purity of our religion, in order to make us appear as some cult, or a bunch of ignorant fanatics.

"But with Allah as my witness, they will not succeed in this. Our creed is the same as ever - 'Islam is our religion; Koran is our constitution; and Jihad is our quest. Death on the path of Allah is our ultimate reward'."

Fundamentalist Islam first appeared in Chechnya via the Arab volunteers who came to fight the first war of 1994-6. Around this time the first jamaats formed, which later developed into powerful Wahhabi militias.

Several of the Islamic radicals had fought the Soviet army in Afghanistan and wanted to continue the struggle in Chechnya. They included Fathi, a Chechen of Jordanian origin, and Khattab, a Saudi who died last spring under mysterious circumstances. Khattab has since been replaced by his deputy, known as Abu Walid, about whom little is known. Some say that he is a Jordanian Chechen, others claim that, like Khattab, he comes from southern Saudi Arabia.

The end of the first conflict left several Islamic groups in extremely powerful positions. The Akhmadov brothers, Arbi Barayev and Abdul Malik all became wealthy through kidnapping and taking over oilfields.

Post-war ruin and unemployment drove young Chechens en masse into the hands of these Islamic militias. "Wahhabis offered young people something the official Maskhadov administration was powerless to provide," Mohamad Uvaisaev of Alhan-Kala told IWPR. "They gave them a steady income. It was blood money, of course, but who cared?"

"If one person joined, he was issued a weapon and became a rank-and-file mujahedin," recalls Akhmed Dalaev, a former member of Mezhidov's Sharia Guard. "If you brought a group of people with you, you were issued a wireless kit, an off-road vehicle, and weapons for everyone. You became an Amir, or commander, of your group. We were making an average of 100-300 US dollars a month."

By the spring of 1998, most Chechens were strongly opposed to the extreme Islamists, their criminality and calls for the introduction of the Sharia law.

Most Chechens are Sufi Muslims, whose religious practices are strongly interwoven with old customs and the precepts of Chechen common law, known as adat. Chechens worship their own saints - evlia - who brought Islam to this mountainous country centuries ago.

This puts the majority of the population directly at odds with the incomers, who have no respect for the Chechen Islamic tradition - dismissing it as apostasy, ignorance and polytheism - while the Wahhabis are accused in turn of being interlopers and troublemakers.

"The Wahhabi militias were manned by junkies, drunks and generally people of dubious background," recalls Zaindi-Haji, a mullah from Pervomaiskoe near Grozny. "To be sure, there were some honest acolytes of 'pure Islam' among them, as well, but most of them were in it only for the money.

"They would stop at nothing to achieve their mercenary ends. They used religion to brainwash young Chechens and cause splits in society. This was a great evil for which they will never be forgiven."

However, just as support for fundamentalist Islam had all but vanished, a new war in 1999 and Russia's subsequent brutal tactics against Chechen civilians have driven young people back into the arms of Wahhabi teachings and Jamaat squads.

"Our young people have lost moral guidance," lamented Sharani Jambekov, a professor at the university in Grozny. "The war has wreaked havoc on their views and system of values."

"Every single Chechen family has lost someone in the war. Young people see it as their duty to avenge the death of their next of kin, and that's the main reason why many of them join Wahhabi movements."

Umalt Dudayev is the pseudonym of a Chechen journalist

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