

Dagestani Students Volunteer for Islamist Groups

Alarm bells ring as young men slip away to join militant Islamists.

The North Caucasian republic of Dagestan has been shocked by the case of nine medical students, some from well-off families, who have apparently joined up with militant Islamic fighters in the mountains.

Dagestan's interior ministry said that in November, four families alerted it to the disappearance of their sons. The ministry subsequently established that in all, nine young men had vanished. Searches of their homes turned up extremist and terrorist literature and bomb-making manuals, according to the authorities.

Nothing has been heard of the nine since they vanished, but the authorities say they are certain that they have now joined militant groups.

It later transpired that four of the nine had been expelled from the Medical Academy in Dagestan a year ago, but their parents had been unaware of this.

Those who knew the missing men said they were well-behaved and studious, and pious Muslims.

If confirmed, the flight of the nine medical students would be the biggest defection to militant groups by a group of young men in recent times.

For more than a decade, Dagestan has been plagued by a low-intensity conflict between the security forces and rebels who flit between the high mountains and apartment blocks in Makhachkala. In the last week, two senior officials – a deputy speaker of parliament and a Supreme Court – have been assassinated.

The interior ministry held a round table discussion on the issue at which it presented its vision of what was going on.

Ministry spokesman Mark Tolchinsky said that 31 police officers and 53 members of “illegal armed formations” had been killed in clashes this year.

Of the militants, he said, “We can't say that each one of them was a dangerous ‘devil’.”

“Even today, fresh people are being attracted into the ranks of the bandits, whose average age is between 20 and 25,” said Badrudin Shakhmuradov, the acting chief of the ministry's criminal investigations department. “People of all ethnic groups, from all regions of the republic and from all income groups are going into the forests.”

Shakhmuradov said that the most radical recruits to Islamic groups were young men who either could not or did not want to find a normal role in society. Others, he said, were “military romantics” – young men often with a good education, who blamed their own problems on others.

“There are students and there are university graduates. Some of their ideological mentors may even have doctorates,” he said.

“But their level of education is no impediment to them organising killings and explosions. When these people are detained, it emerges from conversations with them that they are very far removed from Islam and are ignorant about even fundamental religious questions.”

“Special operations” occur on a fairly frequent basis in Dagestan, in which the security forces surround a house or apartment block, lay siege to it and end up killing the suspected militants inside. The fact that many of those killed are as young as 18 causes disquiet amongst the public.

In January 2006, the siege of an apartment in Makhachkala ended with most of those inside being killed.

IWPR saw a videotape discovered inside, which shows a group of young men cleaning automatic weapons inside the apartment and insulting “cowardly” Muslims who will not stand to the authorities in Dagestan. A group of them is then shown in a forest brandishing weapons and shouting “Allahu Akbar!”

Supporters of the militants say that they are merely striking a blow for freedom and true Islam in a repressive state, where they say conventional religion has become too overlaid with tradition, and too close to government.

“These boys are being condemned to death simply because they don’t behave like other Dagestani Muslims,” said a young man from the town of Khasavyurt with sympathies for the radicals.

“Sometimes a man disappears at night on the way to the mosque, and in the morning his body is discovered full of bullets in the mountains 300 km away from Khasavyurt,” he said.

“Then his body is shown on the news with an automatic weapon next to it, ‘Wahhabi’ [fundamentalist Islamic] literature, and the map of a school, as though he was planning a terrorist act. The same thing happens in Chechnya and Ingushetia. The government is driving its own people into the forests. Not everyone wants to live in a police state.”

Another puzzling case is that of a man named Kurban, who was studying at Dagestan’s institute of public economy and whom police say they detained in October with a gun and a sack full of food and winter clothing, heading for the forests to join the Islamists.

Interior ministry spokesman Tolchinsky interviewed the man after he was detained, and said, “When I asked him where he was going, he said, ‘On jihad’. I asked, ‘A jihad against whom?’ and he answered, ‘Against the police.’ I asked why he wanted to kill them and he said because the Russian state paid their salaries.”

The man said his father worked for local government authority in Buinaksk. “So I asked him who paid his father’s salary, wasn’t it the Russian government?” recalled Tolchinsky. “He said yes. ‘So why didn’t you

start with him?’ ‘Well, I can’t kill my own father.’”

The interior ministry said Kurban had been recruited by a 14-year-old whose father, a radical extremist, has been operating from the forests of Dagestan for the past three years.

Kurban was expelled from his institute after he was shown on local television and described as a militant. He is currently back in his remote native village and could not be contacted by IWPR for his side of the story.

One of Kurban’s teachers at the institute, Nuramat Abduragimov, did not comment on his pupil’s supposed leanings towards radical Islam, but said he understood that no criminal charges had been brought against him. Abduragimov said that if Kurban was not prosecuted, he would be reinstated in the institute.

He said Kurban had always registered good marks and had been a diligent student. “I remember him as a modest young man, who in contrast to others, did not react angrily when he was told off for missing classes or being late,” he said.

Rasul Gajiev, an official at Dagestan’s ministry of nationalities, said much greater efforts should be made to influence potential militants before they were won over by radical Islamists.

“There is a stage when a young man is studying in school or at university,” said Gajiev. “He talks to us, goes to lessons, and on the outside he is just like the rest of us. But this is the time when we are losing this young man because we cannot offer him an ideology that counteracts Wahhabism.”

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