

## **Maskhadov And Basaev - United In The Face Of A Common Enemy**

**Author:** [Ruslan Isaev](#)

The second Chechen war has bridged the differences between Chechen president Aslan Maskhadov and his long-time political rival, Shamil Basaev, the most notorious Chechen field commander of recent times.

The second Chechen war has assuaged, if only temporarily, some contradictions between the Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov and Shamil Basaev, the most notorious Chechen warlord of recent times.

After the first Chechen war ended in August 1996, the divide between Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov and Shamil Basaev, the most powerful of the Chechen military leaders, widened to unbridgeable levels. The failure of Maskhadov's efforts to rein in Basaev and the lack of return on his attempts to coexist with Moscow alienated him from the major Chechen forces.

But the August Russian offensive caught both the population and the Chechen leadership unawares - and forced Basaev and the other field commanders to put aside their differences and unite in the face of a common enemy.

The two fought together against the Russians in 1994-95. As commander of the defence of Grozny, credit for which he largely placed on Basaev. It was thanks to Basaev's considerable talents that the Chechen armed units were able to inflict such damage on the Russians in the fighting of October 1994.

But Basaev had little enthusiasm for command structures. He disagreed with the strategies of Chechen resistance leader Djovkhar Dudaev and his lieutenant Maskhadov. Basaev instead urged the Chechens to take the war into Russia, an independent line that ultimately culminated in the hostage standoff at a hospital in the Russian town of Budennovsk in June 1995.

After the end of the first Chechen war that the friendship between Maskhadov and Basaev started to break down. Both men craved the presidency of Chechnya and left no stone unturned in their efforts to defeat one another. In the end, however, Maskhadov won by a clear majority, 60 per cent to 26 per cent.

Basaev remained, however, extremely influential. And Maskhadov, surrounded by weak ministers, took this fact into consideration and asked Basaev to rejoin the government team.

Basaev was appointed Deputy Prime Minister, despite some constitutional level objections, and immediately set to work trying to improve the economy and agriculture. His reform programme failed, however, and Basaev laid the blame at Maskhadov's door.

Basaev accused Maskhadov of surrounding himself with ineffectual people. On August 19, 1998 Basaev and his supporters held an unsanctioned rally in the center of Grozny calling for Maskhadov's resignation for violating more than 10 articles of the Constitution.

But though he has always presented himself as a man of discipline and a supporter of statehood and order, Basaev's efforts to transform himself after the last conflict failed for various reasons.

He would not accept that he is at least partly responsible for creating the environment that allowed the

lawless combat units to run free across Chechnya and that by refusing to submit to central authority he fuelled the rise in kidnapping and other crimes.

The Islamic "peacekeepers" of the armed brigades of the Congress of Chechnya and Dagestan provide a good example. Maskhadov never sanctioned these structures. In fact these brigades were formed against the president's will.

Yet post-war acting president Zelimkhan Yandarbiev and then his successor Maskhadov rewarded other commanders who followed the Congress' example.

This support later proved to be misplaced, particularly in the case of field commander Sulim Yamadaev, promoted to the rank of general and deputy commander of the Chechen National Guard after the war and who led the fighting against Islamists in the city of Gudermes during 1998.

Through Yamadaev's efforts the conflict was localised and Maskhadov promised to punish the Islamists, under Islamic Sharia traditional law. But fearful of civil war in Chechnya, Maskhadov again went gently against the Islamists, breaking his promise, infuriating Yamadaev and driving him into alliance with the pro-Russian Chechen religious leader, Mufti Akhmad Khadzhi Kadirov.

The president was left isolated and without the support he needed to stop Islamists accused of kidnapping, stealing oil and other crimes, and finally from moving against Dagestani and Russian forces in Botlikh and Tsumadin in Dagestan in August 1999.

Maskhadov tried to distance himself from Basaev, calling the action an 'adventure'. But he refused to enter into open confrontation with Basaev and Khatab. He merely said Basaev was a volunteer and an ordinary citizen of Chechnya with no links to the official authorities in Grozny.

But the second Chechen war has changed everything once more. Neither Maskhadov nor Basaev can survive alone and as the Russian army once more forces its way into Chechnya. The war is once more under way and Maskhadov has once more taken on the responsibility of leading the resistance against the invading federal troops.

Shamil Basaev, in his turn, has acknowledged the necessity of placing his units under a centralised Chechen military command. To remain an independent fighting force would reduce his army to the status of "Indian fighters", to use his own term.

Basaev has always resisted pressure to join a centrally commanded resistance force. His rather formal submission to Maskhadov is indeed an unwilling step. But nevertheless commander Shamil Basaev is once more sharing a map with Maskhadov, once more jointly planning the Chechen military response.

Ruslan Isaev is a freelance Chechen journalist who has reported for RFE and Vremya MN.

**Location:** Stavropol  
Russia  
North Ossetia  
Ingushetia

**Focus:** Caucasus

---

**Source URL:** <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/maskhadov-and-basaev-united-face-common-enemy>