

## **SUFISM AND FUNDAMENTALISM IN DAGESTAN AND CHECHENYA**

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Résumé : This paper is based on personal field researches in the area. It tells about particular features of sufism in Chechnya and Dagestan. Regional Muslim intellectual centre of North Caucasus is Dagestan which is described as the land of sheikhs per excellence. The author gives a detailed description of Muslim organizations in Dagestan. The rising of radical Islam (“Wahhabism”) is shown as an important phenomenon for all North Caucasus. Between two wars in 1997-1999 “Wahhabism” started to disseminate quickly in Chechnya. The author tells the story of Jihad in Dagestan mountains in August-September 1999. The defeat of the radical Muslims led to repression, punitive operations and reactions and opened the way to the Second Chechen war.

This paper – mostly devoted to Sufism in Dagestan – is based on personal field researches that I have carried out for the past ten years in the area. In the Northern Caucasus, Sufi presence is rather strong in Dagestan, Chechnya and Ingushetia. Outside this Sufi zone, few Sufi groups can be found only in Karachai.<sup>1</sup> But the regional Muslim intellectual center of Northern Caucasus is Dagestan. Both Sufi and Salafi (fundamentalist) ideas in Northern Caucasus started to disseminate throughout this area from Dagestan. Today, Sufi traditions are particularly strong not just in Dagestan but as well in Chechnya and Ingushetia although differences can be pointed out between Sufi Islam in Dagestan and Sufi Islam in Vainakh territory (Chechnya and Ingushetia).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Karachai is a Turkic area of Karachayevo-Cherkessia, a part of Russian Federation.

<sup>2</sup> The Vainakh territory includes two republics: Chechnia and Ingushetia. At the time of Soviet Union, they formed one republic “Checheno-Ingushetia”.

### Particular features of Chechen Sufism

In Dagestan, Sufi Islam traditionally takes a structured form and is similar to Sufism in other countries. Usually the sheikh gives *ijaza* or *iznu* (permission) to his disciple or disciples in a regular way. The *silsilat* (chain of the spiritual legacy) system survived over Soviet era and maintained itself in an undamaged form. The situation is rather different in Chechnya and Ingushetia. Kunta-haji, the essential and most venerated spiritual Chechen teacher (sheikh) – and a member of the Qadiriya brotherhood (*tariqat*) –, was prejudiced by Imam Shamil and, then, arrested by Russian authorities. He died in 1867 in a small town called Ustuzhna in the North of Russia.<sup>3</sup> So, he couldn't deliver his *iznu* to any of his disciples in a regular way and therefore this “permission” was given through a *ruhania* way (spiritual blessing in the spiritual world). Other Chechen and Ingush teachers (notably Sheikh Chimmirza, Sheikh Battal-haji or Sheikh Vis-haji) were blessed in this way.<sup>4</sup>

Traditionally, Naqshbandiya *zikr* (sufi prayer), is done in a quiet way. But, in Chechnya, the sheikh and his *murid* (followers) pronounce their prayer “*La illaha ill-Allah*” loudly during *zikr* time, but without dancing. Kunta-haji followers (branch of the Qadiriya), on the other hand, pronounce their *zikr* loudly and dance at the same time. They believe that their sacred dance symbolizes a dance of angels around the throne of Allah.<sup>5</sup> Followers of Vis-haji also use a drum and a Chechen violin for the prayer (*zikr*). In difference with other branches of Chechen Sufism, men and women do *zikr* together.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Jullietta Meshidze, *Kunta-haji – Islam na territorii byvshey Rossiiskoy Imperii* [Kunta-haji – L’islam dans les anciens territoires de l’Empire russe], Moscow, Vol. I, 1998, p. 61.

<sup>4</sup> All those sheikhs were followers of Kunta-haji. They developed his teachings and organized their own *wirds* (branches). For details, see Julietta Meshidze, *Checheno-Ingusheti. – Islam na territorii byvshey Rossiiskoy Imperii* [Tchéchénie-Ingouchie – L’islam dans les anciens territoires de l’Empire russe], Moscow, Vol. I, 1998, pp. 105-108; Jullietta Meshidze, *Vis-haji – Islam na territorii byvshey Rossiiskoy Imperii* [Vis-Haji – L’islam dans les anciens territoires de l’Empire russe], Moscow, Vol. II, 1999, p. 24

<sup>5</sup> Said-Osman Yahiev, a member of Moscow Kunta-haji community and a scholar who has written an interesting dissertation on Chechen Sufism kindly explained this to me.

<sup>6</sup> Jullietta Meshidze, *Vis-haji.- Islam na territorii..., op. cit.*, p. 24.

### *Sufism and fundamentalism in Daghestan and Chechnia*

Around 60 percent of the Chechen population belong to Kunta-haji branch of Qadiriya.<sup>7</sup> Over the First Russian-Chechen war (1994-96) Kunta-haji followers strongly supported the first Chechen President Dudayev and the idea of an independent Chechnya. At that time, the mufti of Chechnya was Ahmad-haji Qadyrov, a disciple of Kunta-haji. He was very close to Dudayev and declared  *Jihad*  against Russia .

Between the two wars, in 1997-1999, Muslim fundamentalism started to disseminate very quickly in Chechnya. Because he embodied a strong Sufi orientated leader, they persecuted Ahmad-haji Qadyrov, the Chechen mufti. They even tried to kill him a few times and he was obliged to leave Grozny and to hide in his native village Tsentoroy. These persecutions explain why, later on, Qadyrov supported the Russian forces when they invaded Chechnya during the Second Russian-Chechen war in October 1999 and even occupied an official position in the pro-Russian Chechen administration. Definitely, Qadyrov's shift does not mean that all Sufi Muslims in Chechnya support the actual military Russian campaign in the republic, but clearly shows that influential factors and features of the Second Russian-Chechen war are much more complicated than they were over the First war. This new development were strongly connected with the rising of fundamentalism in neighboring Dagestan and its quick dissemination to Chechnya after the end of the First war in August 1996.

### **Dagestan: The land of sheikhs**

Since ancient times, Dagestan has been well known in the Northern Caucasus for being a religious area. Before the 1917 revolution, more than 1700 ordinary mosques could be found in Dagestan, as well as 356 'cathedral' mosques. 766 schools (*madrassah*) were in operation in which more than 2500 mullahs and qadis worked. In the years of the Soviet regime, the overwhelming majority of mosques were closed, many Moslem scholars (*alims*) were harassed, and the teaching of the Arabic language was forbidden. But by the 1970s and 1980s, religious life was already being revived. In 1987, there were 27 active mosques in the territory of Dagestan. What happened in 1990s can certainly not be called anything but a 'religious renaissance': throughout Dagestan, Muslim communities (*jama'ats*) were restored, mosques were constructed or renovated, Muslim *madrassahs*, institutes and universities were opened. By September 2003, the Republic of Dagestan had registered 1091 'cathedral' mosques, 558 ordinary mosques,

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<sup>7</sup> During the First Russian-Chechen war I travelled intensively in Chechnya working as an observer on Russian-Chechen military agreement for the Russian peace-making NGO "Omega"; I use here my own evaluation.

16 Islamic Universities and Colleges and its 52 branches, as many as 141 *madrassahs* and 324 schools attached to mosques.<sup>8</sup>

The majority of Dagestani Muslims adhere to traditional Sunni Islam according to the Shafi'i school. Local Islam was deeply Sufi, and this is shown in present-day Dagestan in the form of four *tariqat* (brotherhood): Naqshbandiyah, Shaziliyah, Jazuliyah (an offshoot of the Shaziliyah brotherhood) and Qadiriyyah.

In Soviet times, *tariqat* were banned, Sufi sheikhs were either persecuted or they acted underground. Transfer of permissions (*iznu* or *ijaza*) to propagate one *tariqat* from the sheikh to the students also took place underground. It was often the case that when *iznu* (*ijaza*) was transferred, there were either very few witnesses or none at all. This subsequently led to the appearance of numerous sheikhs in the 1990s, one accusing the other of not having obtained the *iznu* (*ijaza*) in the correct way. And as, most of the time, the sheikh who supposedly gave the permission is no longer alive to comment, this added to the confusion.

The most influential sheikh of Dagestan at the moment is the Avar Said Efendi of Chirkey. He teaches according to three *tariqat*: Nakshbandiya, Shaziliya and Jazuliya. Prior to becoming a sheikh, he was a simple shepherd. Today, his *murid* (followers) are in control of the Spiritual Administration of Dagestani Muslims, the Muslim radio and television broadcasts, and the Muslim periodicals. Although there are representatives of various ethnic groups among the followers of Said Efendi, Avars are notably predominant.<sup>9</sup> The Mufti of Dagestan, the Avar Ahmad Hajji Abdullayev, is of course also a *murid* of Said Efendi.

Among other prominent Dagestani sheikhs, one should note the Kumyk<sup>10</sup> Muhammad Amin of Paraul, who passed away in June 1999 and left as a successor Sheikh Muhammed-Mukhtar who lives in Kyakhulay, a settlement in the environments of Makhachkala. Muhammad Amin and Muhammad-Mukhtar are followers of the Naqshbandi *tariqat*.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> These data were given to me by the Committee for Religious Affairs of the Republic of Dagestan in November 2003. There is evidence that after that time only slight changes happened in Dagestan.

<sup>9</sup> The Avars are the most numerous people of Dagestan. By their language, they belong to Avaro-Ando-Tsez group of Dagestan language family. Nowadays they live mostly in Central and Northern Dagestan.

<sup>10</sup> The Kumiks are people of Turkic origin, nowadays they mostly live in Central Dagestan.

<sup>11</sup> During my field works in July 2000, I drove to the sheikh's place (with his son Ibrahim Tajuddinov). Although at the time very ill (and he was already blind), the

*Sufism and fundamentalism in Daghestan and Chechenia*

Another sheikh, the Sheikh Tajuddin of Khasavyurt, who was born in the Andi settlement of Ashali,<sup>12</sup> carried great authority, first of all, among the Ando-Tsez ethnic groups.<sup>13</sup> He gave sermons according to three *tariqat*: Naqshbandiyah, Shaziliyah and Jazuliya. His followers live mainly in the Tsumada, Botlikh, Akhvakh and Khasvyurt districts of Northern Dagestan. After the demise of Sheikh Tajuddin on 10 September 2001, his successor became Sheikh Muhammed, one of the Dargin people,<sup>14</sup> from the village of New Kostek (Khasavyurt district).<sup>15</sup>

The best-known sheikh in South Dagestan is Sirajuddin of Tabasaran. He obtained *iznu* in 1989 from the Naqshbandi Sheikh Abdullah, who lived to the age of 115 and was buried in Derbent at the end of the 1990s. On the 12-13 August 2000, I was a guest of Sheikh Sirajuddin in his native settlement of Khurik. On 12th August there was a large *zikr* in the house of Sirajuddin during which the “*La ilaha illallah*” (There is no god but God) was recited loudly over and over again. In some ways the *zikr* resembled techniques encountered nowadays in new age movements such as “Rebirth” (new generation) and Kriya (Indian respiratory exercise with a simultaneous unique meditation), and as well as being reminiscent of the zeal of members of the “Khlysty” (a Russian sect),<sup>16</sup> judging from the descriptions. Sirajuddin organized a network of *madrassahs* throughout Tabasaran and he became the real spiritual leader of this region. He also established the Islamic university of South Dagestan, situated in Derbent.

In Dagestan, there are also murids of the Naqshbandi Sheikh Muhammad Nazim al-Qubrusi (the “Cypriot”) who lives in Lefke in Northern Cyprus

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sheikh received us and I was able to witness prayings. The sheikh worked individually with his *murids*. During the praying association, they all sat elbow to elbow. Tajuddin forbade collective *zikr* and insisted on individual silent *zikr*.

<sup>12</sup> The Andi are a small group who belongs, by their language, to Avaro-Ando-Tsez group. Officially they aren't recognized as a distinct people and considered as Avars. Ashali is situated in Botlikh district of Dagestan.

<sup>13</sup> The Ando-Tsez ethnicities is a small ethnic group living in Northern and Central Dagestan speaking their own languages of Avaro-Ando-Tsez group and officially included into Avar population.

<sup>14</sup> The Dargin people are the second numerous people of Dagestan. they belong to Dagestan language family and mostly live in Central Dagestan.

<sup>15</sup> The son of Sheikh Ibrahim Tajuddinov graciously reported this information to me.

<sup>16</sup> “Khlysty” is a name of Christian Russian sect whose followers believe that Jesus Christ and the Virgin have always real incarnations during the history. Nowadays this sect almost disappeared. They used rhythmical movements and dancing in their practices. They believed that they did this following a practice of the Biblical king David.

Mikhail ROSHCIN

and who was a student of a sheikh of Avar origin Abdullah Dagestani, who spent most of his life in Syria.

### **Organization of Muslims and Muslim organizations in Dagestan**

Traditional Sufi Islam in Dagestan is distinguished, first of all, by its orientation towards intellectual values. It is non-aggressive, and treats the concept of *jihad* as a personal struggle of the believer towards self-improvement. *Murid* relate to their sheikh just about in the same way as simple laymen in Orthodox Christianity do towards their *Starets*.<sup>17</sup> In political terms, Said Efendi of Chirkey's murids are the most noticeable. Not only they control the Spiritual Administration for the Dagestani Muslims, which plays an important political role, but they are also closely connected with the state structures of Dagestan. And in religious terms, I can certainly assume that it is the close connection of *murid* with their sheikhs that is the basis of the strong adherence of Dagestan's population to its traditions and to its religious practice. It is not really possible to evaluate with accuracy what percentage of the Muslim population in Dagestan regularly performs their religious rites, but even if I assume that this number fluctuates between 20-30 percent of the population, then this would be considerably higher on average than in the various different religions practicing rites in Russia as a whole.

Of course the percentage of active followers of Sufism is still low, but it is obviously sufficient to create the special spiritual culture characteristic of Dagestani Islam. As a field researcher, who has worked in Dagestan for the last ten years, I can state that, probably, with the exception of Chechnya, this republic is the most religious in Russia.

At the beginning of the 1990s, attempts were made to create Muslim boards for each of the separate ethnic communities in Dagestan. Kumyks, Dargins and Laks took steps to form their own administrations. The process came to a halt in February 1994, when Dagestan Supreme Soviet ruled that there should be only one Islamic administration for the republic, as it was the case during the Soviet era. Since then, the Spiritual Administration for the Dagestani Muslims (SADM) has controlled (or has tried to control) all the activities of registered mosques (Sunni mosques for the majority of them, and for a minority Shi'ite). The SADM acts to a certain extent as a Dagestani state church, similar to the Moscow Patriarchate for the Russian Orthodox Church. Just as the patriarchate lobbied hard for the new federal law on

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<sup>17</sup> In Russian, *Starets* means "an elder". In the Russian Orthodox tradition, *Starets* is a spiritually powerful monk who has his own followers. He usually has many spiritual children.

### *Sufism and fundamentalism in Dagestan and Chechnia*

religion (finally signed by President Yeltsin in September 1997), the SADM has been lobbying the Dagestan People's Assembly for a similar law to strengthen its already quasi-governmental status. This law was finally adopted after the fall of the Wahhabite (fundamentalist) *jihād* in Dagestan mountains in August-September 1999.

### **The “Wahhabis” in Dagestan: the rising of radical Islam**

Salafi – or fundamentalist Islam – appeared in Dagestan at the end of the 1980s. Two branches or tendencies can be distinguished among Dagestani Salafis, a radical one and moderate one. By the second half of the 1990s, the radical branch had adopted a more formal structure and today it is called the “*Muslim Jama'at*” (Muslim community). The spiritual leader and main representative of these radical Muslims (the so-called “Wahhabis” as they are named in Northern Caucasus) is Bagauddin Muhammed<sup>18</sup>, an ethnic Khvarshin<sup>19</sup> who was proclaimed “Amir of Muslim Jama'at”.

Bagauddin expressed to me his view and his program during our encounter in the summer 1997: “We don't want to seize power, we want all power to be in the hands of Allah. For us, geographic and state borders have no significance, we work and act in those places where it is possible for us to do so. Dagestan today is being governed from Moscow; we do not have an Islamic society like the one currently existing in Chechnya. (...) The post-communist Dagestan is in a state of *shirk* (paganism). We would approve a total ban on the sale of alcohol, but for us our *iman* (faith) and *tawhid* (Monotheism) are much more important. We would employ the services of the *muhtasibin* (moral police). For us the use of tobacco and drugs is considered to be *haram* (forbidden).”

Starting from 1993, Bagauddin and his closest associates, who were based in the town of Kyzilyurt near Mahachkala, were subjected to systematic discrimination and repression by the government and by representatives of the traditional Sufi Islam. In the fall of 1997, Bagauddin and his closest associates retreated to Chechnya, calling this voyage a “little *hijra*” in an allusion to the Prophet Muhammed's journey from Mecca to Medina in the

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<sup>18</sup> His full name is Bagauddin Muhammed Magomedov or Bagauddin Muhammed Kebedov. In the literature, he can be found under all these names. He refers himself as “Bagauddin” and therefore will be mentioned under this simple name here after.

<sup>19</sup> The Khvarshin people is a small ethnicity. By their language, they belong to Avaro-Ando-Tsez language group. They live in Northern Dagestan. A part of them was forcefully moved to Chechen land during Stalin era. Therefore, for example, Bagauddin was born in 1945 at Vedenov, the native village of Shamil Bassayev.

Mikhail ROSHCHIN

year 622. But the growing alienation of the “Wahhabi” movement from the rest of Dagestani society contributed to the radicalization of the movement.

To a large extent the beliefs of the “*Muslim Jama'at*” were put in practice in 1997-1999 in the villages of Karamakhi and Chabanmakhi, located in the Buinaksk region in the central part of Dagestan. The majority of the villages' inhabitants accepted the ideology of this radical movement, and the local Muslim community (which had its mosque in the village of Karamakhi) became a tiny “Wahhabi” republic, i.e. the “advance guard of radical Islam in Dagestan”. Young people in search of “pure Islam” flocked to these villages from all over Dagestan and from other republics of the Northern Caucasus. While the villagers respected Bagauddin as its moral and ideological authority, they looked to Khattab as their military authority. Khattab, a Saudian by birth, had settled in the village of Karamakhi even before the war in Chechnya broke out in December 1994. His closest ally, who led the defense of Karamakhi and Chabanmakhi, was Jarulla Rajbaddinov.

### **Chechenia as a base for the *jihad***

At the beginning of August 1999, radical Muslims declared a *jihad* (holy war) for the liberation of Dagestan from the hands of non-believers.<sup>20</sup> The Chechen troop commander Shamil Bassayev, amir of the North Caucasus liberation army, and the commander Khattab were the military leaders of this *jihad*. Shamil Bassayev distinguished himself by leading a raid on Buddenovsk in 1995, following which the Russian leadership was forced to begin negotiations with Chechens. In Chechnya, Shamil Bassayev became a national hero, but in Dagestan he was not accepted as the leader of the *jihad* because leaders of holy wars, the imams, traditionally belonged to the Avar ethnic group.

Khattab remained the most popular with the Dagestani radical Muslims. Khattab was born in 1969 in 'Ar'ar in the North of Saudi Arabia. His real name was Samir al-Suweilim. When he was 18 years old, he went to Afghanistan where he gained his first experience of military conflict. Then, he moved to the Dagestan village of Karamakhi where he married a local girl. From early 1995, Khattab was in Chechnya where he gradually became one of the most influential military commanders. In the Spring 1996, his fighters mounted an ambush in the village of Iaryshmardy and destroyed a large Russian military convoy, killing 95 persons. After the end of the First

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<sup>20</sup> M. Roshchin, N. Yefremova, “Features of Jihad in Dagestan”, *NG-Religii*, n°16, 23 August 2000.

### *Sufism and fundamentalism in Dagestan and Chechnya*

Russian-Chechen war in August 1996, he set up a number of military training camps in Chechnya designated to train the radical Muslims of the Northern Caucasus.

Until the start of the present war, the main centre for the training of warriors was situated on the outskirts of Serzhen-Yurt not far from Grozny. It seems that the radical Muslims of Chechnya and Dagestan receive significant financial support from International radical Muslim circles. There is evidence that they receive help from such organizations as the “World Jihad Front” and the Fund of the Muslim Brotherhood Party.<sup>21</sup>

By the beginning of August 1999, cross-border incidents between Dagestan and Chechnya were happening on an almost daily basis. Finally Bassayev and Khattab chose the Botlikh district for the main base of their assault. They managed to attract supporters for the *jihad* from the Avar villages of Ansalta, Shodroda, Rakhata and Tando. In those villages, notably in Ansalta, there were significant groups of radical Muslim youths. The Islamic Republic of Dagestan was proclaimed after the rebel forces had seized the aforementioned villages in the Botlikh district. Bassayev and Khattab’s forces aimed to take Botlikh and continue along the main river Andiyskoye Koyu in order to take the village of Tlokh, which would open up the way to central Dagestan.<sup>22</sup>

### **The defeat of the radical Muslim forces**

Although it is estimated that only around six to seven percent of the Dagestan population sympathize with the radical fundamentalist ideas,<sup>23</sup> Khattab and Bassayev probably counted on the support of a significant proportion of the local population, thinking that they would be seen as liberators. However, this did not happen. In fact, quite the reverse took place: local militias were immediately established in the neighboring villages that had not been seized by the rebels. In Botlikh district, the ethnic Andi people<sup>24</sup> closed four mountain passes, the most important of which are

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<sup>21</sup> According to Magomed-Rasul Mugumayev, mufti of the Confederacy of People of the Caucasus.

<sup>22</sup> This idea was kindly suggested to me by Russian scholar Alexander Krishtopa living in Mahachkala.

<sup>23</sup> There are no official statistics on this issue. This is here again my own evaluation as a field-researcher working for a long period in Dagestan.

<sup>24</sup> The Andi people were not included in the census but are estimated to number about 40,000. In recent years, they have become more politically assertive, seeking greater language rights and to be added to Dagestan’s titular nationalities and represented on its state council.

*Mikhail ROSHCIN*

Harami and Riqwani. Actually, the Andi people have for many years quarreled with the Chechens about alpine pastures. Plus, Andi people are strong adherents of Sufi Islam and despise “Wahhabism”.<sup>25</sup> A decision to resist fundamentalists was made by the Andi jama’at societies of four villages: Andi, Gagatl’, Riqwani and Ashali.

The lack of popular support for the “liberators” stemmed in part from the fact that traditional folk Islam, which is adhered to by the vast majority of Dagestan’s Muslim believers, coexists poorly with radical fundamentalist Islam. In those villages where there are supporters of both trends, separate communities have formed, each with its own mosque. Moreover, the majority of the population of Dagestan is extremely hostile and suspicious of anything connected with so-called “Wahhabism”. Here, the word “Wahhabi” has a derogatory and negative connotation. As a result of the events in Botlikh, when the insurgents were defeated, an unexpected alliance was formed between the Dagestanis and the Russians. Women in Botlikh treated Russian soldiers as if they were their own sons. Nothing of this nature ever happened in Chechnya where Russian Army was always considered as a hostile force.

### **Repression, punitive operations and reactions**

The euphoria following the defeat of the radical Muslim forces in Botlikh district had scarcely evaporated when, on the night of 28-29 August 1999, punitive measures were taken against the inhabitants of Karamakhi and Chabanmakhi, which a year and a half ago had declared themselves to be a special Muslim area governed by Sharia law. The villages were totally controlled by radical Muslims, the majority of whom are Dargins. The decision to mount this operation was passed on 25 August, the very day that the Russian Prime Minister – at the time Vladimir Putin – arrived in Dagestan. However, the decision was not made by Putin alone, but in conjunction with the chairman of the State Council of Dagestan, Magomedali Magomedov. These punitive measures violated the agreement reached a year before in August 1998 between Serguei Stepashin, the Minister for Home Affairs at the time, and the inhabitants of the “Wahhabi” villages. In 1998, Stepashin was warmly welcomed in the villages of Karamakhi and Chabanmakhi. He reached a verbal agreement with the “Wahhabis” by which they would be allowed to live according to Sharia law but would refrain from proselytizing their views outside their community.

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<sup>25</sup> This information was kindly given me by Prof. Mamaikhan Aglarov who visited Andi villages at the time of the *jihād* in Dagestan.

### *Sufism and fundamentalism in Dagestan and Chechnya*

The Botlikh events gave the federal side an opportunity to violate this agreement and dispose of the villages.

The local leader of these villages and the director of their defenses was Khattab's closest comrade, Jarulla Rajbaddinov. The villages were extremely well-armed and their defenses were strong. They even had anti-aircraft guns. The villages were in the foothills, near a dense forest, where the rebels could easily retreat should they be forced to wage a partisan war. However after two weeks of armed struggle, the Russian military forces crushed the resistance in these villages, leaving few buildings in place. According to the "Wahhabi" sources around 1200 soldiers perished over this operation.

The punitive operation against the Karamakhi-Chabanmakhi community has encouraged a new wave of activity from Bassayev and Khattab, whose forces entered Novolaksky district on 5 September 1999. This time Bassayev's and Khattab's units<sup>26</sup> were comprised mostly of Chechens, and they rode to within five kilometers of Khasavyurt. Had they reached Khasavyurt the situation could have become very serious because, there, they would have been able to count on the assistance of local Chechens (Akkin Chechens)<sup>27</sup> who constitute more than one-third of the city's population. If they had taken the city, the fate of the *jihad* would have unfolded in a completely different way: Khasavyurt opens up the road to Mahachkala, the capital of Dagestan, where defenses were already being built on the city's outskirts. Instead, by the middle of September, the Chechen units sustained heavy casualties and had to withdraw into Chechnya.

### **Conclusion**

This attempt to start a *jihad* in Dagestan was perceived by most of the population as aggression organized by Chechnya's extremist circles. For this reason the local militias helped the federal forces against the "mujahidin". In general, the idea of *jihad* (or "*gazawat*" as it is called in the North Caucasus) is hardly alien to the Dagestani consciousness. It is particularly viable among

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<sup>26</sup> Khattab remained very active over time of the Second Russian-Chechen war until April 2002 when he died from a poisoned letter given to him by a secret agent of Russian FSB (Federal Service of Security) infiltrated to his detachment. Chechen government awarded him in autumn 1996 after the end of the First Russian-Chechen war. After his death his eldest brother Mansur al-Suweilim gave some new details concerning his personal life. See "Al-Hayat" (in Arabic), 29 April 2002; 1<sup>st</sup> may 2002.

<sup>27</sup> Akkin Chechens are one of the 14 titular nationalities of Dagestan.

*Mikhail ROSHCHIN*

the Avars, Dargins, Laks and Akkin Chechens. But the *gazawat* was always led by an imam whose authority extended to many ethnicities. And, here, all the five imams of Dagestan and Chechnya were Avars.

For the Avars it is inconceivable that the next imam could be a Chechen. But to some degree, as an “amir”, Bassayev had pretensions to the role of imam. For most Dagestanis, Bassayev’s image robs the idea of the *jihād* of any allure. Chechnya, the only Islamic state in the post-Soviet space,<sup>28</sup> did not behave according even to a loose interpretation of Muslim canons, which prohibit attack on fellow Muslims.

Perhaps it is the negative example of the Chechen state of 1997-1999 that cured Dagestanis of any illusion about having their own “Islamic state”. Certainly the armed conflict of August-September 1999 persuaded all the Dagestanis, regardless of nationality/ethnicity, that they had something to defend. The war against Bassayev and Khattab united members of different nationalities and became an important factor in the formation of a Dagestani identity.

The incursion of radical salafis from Chechnya into Dagestan and Chechen President Aslan Mashadov’s refusal to dissociate himself fully from Bassayev, by firing him from the Chechen commanders and bringing him to trial, opened the way to the Second Russian-Chechen war. In Dagestan itself, this war started a difficult period for all Muslims (not only “Wahhabis”) who do not agree with the policy of total control realized by the Spiritual Administration for the Dagestani Muslims and its protector, Said-efendi of Chirkey. Security agents started to seize any young man suspected of being “Wahhabi”. Now, it is even a rather difficult time for all sheikhs who are not connected with Said-efendi and for followers of Ahmed-qadi Akhtayev, a moderate Salafi teacher who died in March 1998 in his native village Kudali.

It seems that the authorities in Mahachkala have interpreted the lack of popular support for the “Wahhabis” and a willingness to side with the government against mujaheds as license to suppress further all competing strands of Islamic faith. This can only lead to further alienation and intolerance between the official SADM and various representatives of the whole spectrum of belief.

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<sup>28</sup> In the beginning of 1990s the constitution of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria (a self-proclaimed state in the post-Soviet space) was secular, but this constitution was changed during the First Russian-Chechen war and this Republic was proclaimed an Islamic state. The second president of Chechnya Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev approved, in 1996, the introduction of Islamic Codex of Criminal law written according to fundamentalist Sudanese model.