

## 10 Allah's foot soldiers

### An assessment of the role of foreign fighters and Al-Qa'ida in the Chechen insurgency

*Brian Glyn Williams*

If you would have told me back when we were in Afghanistan (in the 1980s) that one day we would be fighting jihad in Russia itself ... I would never have believed you!

(Amir Khattab, Commander of the international jihad brigade in Chechnya)

On the eve of Russia's first invasion of Chechnya, in 1994, the Chechens' mantra of 'nothing is forgotten, nothing will be forgotten!' mingled with the Sufi *dhikrs* (chants) to Allah as the secularized Chechen mystic-Muslims prepared to once again defend their homes and families from their aggressive Slavic neighbour. In time-honoured fashion, thousands of Chechen *jigits* (braves) armed themselves with Kalashnikovs and RPG-7s (rocket propelled grenades, the so-called 'Chechen atom bomb') and went to do battle in the killing streets of Grozny and the familiar mountains of their youth. Their motivations for fighting ranged from a sense of Baltic-style nationalist activism to a deeper desire to take revenge on Moscow for conquering their lands and deporting their parents and grandparents in 1944.

But the Western response to the Chechen claims to independence differed markedly from that given to the Baltic states. As the Russian incursion into Chechnya devolved into a messy total war against the well-armed Chechen people, the Chechen nationalist leadership made constant appeals to the West for recognition and assistance in obtaining a ceasefire. The response of the West to the appeals of Chechen secessionist President Dudayev, however, was a deafening silence.

The desperately pressed Chechen fighters thus faced the prospect of total diplomatic isolation as the very Western democracies that their leaders had emulated turned their backs on them. With little or no outside support the Chechens stood little chance in frontal combat with the much larger Russian federal forces. As Grozny's fixed defensive lines fell to Russian massed infantry and armour assaults, the outnumbered Chechen bands retreated to the safety of the southern mountains in the winter of 1994–95 to wage an asymmetric war.

During this retreat, which many observers felt presaged the quick collapse of the quixotic Chechen resistance of President Dudayev, televised images of the retreating Chechen defenders were beamed across the world. One of these

images featured Chechen fighters rallying their forces with the traditional Muslim war cry '*Allahu Akbar!*' ('God is the Greatest' in Arabic).

This episode would conspire with events taking place beyond the borders of tiny Chechnya to link the cause of the beleaguered Chechen secessionists to the struggle of the very Arab *mujahidin* volunteers (known as the 'Afghan-Arabs') who had been bombed in Afghanistan in the 1980s by then Soviet Air Force General Johar Dudayev.<sup>1</sup> The account of the migration of these foreign *jihadi* fighters to post-Soviet Chechnya is one of the murkiest chapters in modern Chechen history and one full of implications. For the foreign fighters have not only added an extremist edge to the Chechen nationalist insurgency, they have provided the Kremlin with a propaganda tool for painting its Chechen nationalist adversaries in broad brush strokes as 'al-Qa'ida.'

### **Enter Khattab: the *jihad* brotherhood arrives in Chechnya**

On 16 April 1996 the Russians came to know the name of *Amir* (Arabic 'Commander') Khattab. On that day, a thirty vehicle convoy of the 245th Motorized Rifle Regiment came under a textbook mountain ambush attack in the foreboding Argun Gorge, near the village of Yarysh Mardy. Approximately 100 ambushers hidden in dugouts on the side of the road destroyed the Russian communication vehicles in their first salvo. They then blew up armoured personnel carriers (APCs) in the vanguard and rear of the column, entrapping the enmeshed unit in a predesignated killing zone.<sup>2</sup> During the well-executed two hour attack on the trapped and communicationless column cut off from outside assistance, the ambush force systematically fired armour-piercing grenades into the column destroying scores of Russian BMP APCs and *Kamaz* transport trucks. The attackers then mowed down those who sought to escape their burning vehicles in a deadly crossfire. Only a handful of Russian soldiers lived to tell the horrific story.

As the smoke drifted from the carcasses of the burnt out Russian vehicles an apocalyptic figure was filmed by an aide strolling triumphantly through the blackened Russian corpses brandishing an AK-47 assault rifle and proclaiming '*Allahu Akbar!*' As the smoke cleared from his face, the fighter featured in the video was clearly seen to be a swarthy Arab with a full 'Wahhabi'-style beard, curling long hair and a black beret. The differences between this holy warrior from the Middle East and the local Chechens who grew up in the atheist Soviet system could not have been greater. But that hardly mattered to the outgunned Chechens who would have just as heartily accepted help from Christian fundamentalists as Muslim fanatics from the deserts of Arabia.

This was Khattab's fighting (and acting) debut in a conflict on the frontiers of the *Dar al Islam* (Realm of Islam) that he was to forever link with the global *jihadi* movement. Dubbed copies of Khattab's grisly victory march were soon being sold like hot cakes among the newly heartened Chechen fighters who now felt that someone was finally on their side.<sup>3</sup> Most tellingly, many copies of this video also made their way to radical mosques abroad where they served as

recruitment propaganda for radical extremists who sought to recruit fighters for Chechnya and other causes of the Islamists.<sup>4</sup>

This mountain ambush outside the village of Yarysh Mardy was one of Russia's worst defeats in the first Chechen war. The bloody massacre also signified a startling transformation in tactics and, as will be demonstrated, motives among the demoralized Chechen insurgents. Up to this point the Chechen officers, such as former Soviet artillery commander Aslan Maskhadov (who had been trained by the Soviet Army in the rigid tactics of frontal conflict), had attempted to hold fixed positions against the Russians. The Chechen nationalist leadership had hoped to hold Grozny and other Chechen towns against massive Russian air and ground assaults. Their somewhat naive aim was to prove to the outside world that their forces represented a bona fide state defending its territorial integrity.<sup>5</sup>

The Yarysh Mardy ambush therefore represented something new, for it hardly fit the previous *modus operandi* of the Chechen Army of 'Ichkeria' (the self-proclaimed 'Republic of Chechnya'). On the contrary, the attack resembled the guerrilla tactics of the *mujahidin* 'dukhi' ('ghosts') encountered by Soviet soldiers in the Hindu Kush Mountains of Afghanistan during the 1980s.<sup>6</sup> And it was this similarity in tactics that first alerted the Russian General Staff to the arrival of a new fighting element in Chechnya.

### **The genesis of the *jihad* brotherhood**

As events were to subsequently show, Khattab was the embodiment of a new wave of globetrotting 'neo-*jihadis*.' This new generation of Arab volunteer *jihadis* had cut its teeth fighting on the behalf of Afghan *mujahidin* in the anti-Soviet *jihad* of the 1980s. With the termination of that conflict between 1988 and 1992, many of these fanatics/adventurers sought out other venues to ply their killing trade.

Some of the predominately Yemeni, Saudi, Egyptian, Moroccan, Algerian and Pakistani fighters subsequently made their way to the war-torn Vale of Jammu and Kashmir, a Muslim-populated area in India disputed by it with Pakistan since 1947. There they waged a bloody *jihad* against the *jawans* (Hindu 'infidel' security forces). In the process, these ex-*mujahidin* radicalized the local Kashmiri Sufi Muslims who joined their *jihadi* fighting units and set a pattern that would be followed across Eurasia.<sup>7</sup> Another group of so-called 'Afghan-Arabs' made their way to Azerbaijan where they fought on the side of the Muslim Azeris against the Christian Armenians in their ultimately unsuccessful war in Nagorno-Karabakh.

But the Balkans proved to be the primary destination for the paladins of the new global *jihad* movement. In 1993 Arab, Turkish and Pakistani fighters made their way to join the volunteer *Katibat al-Mujahidin* ('Holy Warrior Brigade') led by a veteran of the Afghan conflict who went by the *nom de guerre* 'Amir Barbaros'<sup>8</sup> (known also as Abu 'Abd al-'Aziz). Barbaros' foreign *jihadi* troops fought holy war on the behalf of the beleaguered, but secular, Bosnian Muslims,

who were engaged in a life and death nationalist struggle with their Orthodox Serb enemies.<sup>9</sup>

In response to the Bosnians' pleas for assistance, several hundred well armed and skilled volunteer *jihadis* arrived to defend them from the Serbian 'crucifixers.' A *Newsweek* reporter who visited these foreign holy warriors left the following account of them:

'They are very good fighters,' says Osman Sekic, a 46-year-old woodworker from Visenjevo. 'They have no fear for their lives.' Local soldiers who have fought with the *mujahedeen* are impressed with their bravery and their ability to strike terror in the hearts of Serbian fighters, who cringe at the sound of war cries to Allah. The Islamic warriors are admired as martyrs. 'They came here to be killed,' says Elis Bektas, a 22-year-old platoon leader in the Bosnian Army and former philosophy student. 'For them there is no going back.' Small villages like Mehurici are enormously grateful to Islamic warriors whose secrecy they jealously protect. When *mujahedeen* commander Aziz drives through Mehurici in his new black four-wheel-drive Nissan, the town turns out for him. Children wave, old people turn and smile, and other villagers approach with invitations to weddings and parties.<sup>10</sup>

But this welcome wore off when the *jihadi* volunteers refused to recognize Bosnian Army truces with Croatian militias and began attacking NATO and UN peacekeepers. The foreign fighters also made themselves unwelcome among many average Bosnian Sufis when they began propagating their alien 'Wahhabi' form of Islam and calls for total *jihad*. In this sense the Bosnian episode not only presaged the military impact that the volunteer *jihadis* would have in Chechnya, it offered an interesting model for de-linking foreign extremists such as Khattab or Zarqawi from local Muslim forces.

After the US-sponsored Dayton Peace Accords ended the Balkan conflicts in 1995, the Arab-Afghan *mujahidin* were forced to decamp from Bosnia by NATO. The ease with which this foreign element subsequently lost its influence over Bosnian religious, political and military affairs has implications for other zones of *jihad* such as the Sunni Triangle in Iraq, Kashmir and Chechnya. The lesson seems to be: remove the external stimuli that bring foreign *jihadis* and local Muslim forces together at an early stage of conflict and the extremists lose their ability to graft the notion of *jihad* to localized or pre-existing struggles. But the longer these stimuli (foreign invasion/occupation) exist, the greater the chances that jihadism will make deep inroads in the locals' military, religious and political institutions.

Fully knowing this rule of thumb, Arab volunteers in Bosnia sought to intimidate moderate Bosnians and perpetuate the war with the Serbs before they were finally expelled in 1995/96. Many members of the largely Arab volunteer *jihad* corps from Bosnia subsequently felt betrayed by the ungrateful Bosnian Muslims. But the failure of the *jihadis* to establish a territorial foothold in

Bosnia did nothing to dampen their interest in spreading the *jihad* revolution to other frontline Muslim areas.

### **Extreme *jihad* from Sarajevo to Grozny**

The man who was to help the homeless brotherhood of *jihadi* warriors find a new theatre for holy war was Amir Khattab. Khattab's real name was Samir ibn Salih ibn 'Abdallah al-Suwaylim (his alias was in reference to 'Umar ibn Khattab, the second Caliph) and he came from the town of 'Ar'ar in northern Saudi Arabia.<sup>11</sup> Pilloried in the Russian press as the 'Chechen 'Usama bin Laden' or the 'Black Arab,' Khattab was both loathed by his Russian enemies and lionized by many (but certainly not all!) Chechens whom he had come to defend. Khattab earned his battlefield credentials in several major engagements with the Soviet special forces (*spetnaz*) and regular army units in Afghanistan. For example, he appears to have fought and been seriously wounded in the battle of Jaji, the first real clash between Arab volunteer *jihadis* and the Soviets. Interestingly, this battle was also the baptism of fire that appears to have served as the 'epiphany' for a fellow Arab fighter, 'Usama bin Laden, who was both thrilled and empowered by the experience of surviving several waves of Soviet assaults.<sup>12</sup>

Having survived the Afghan *jihad* with only the loss of two fingers on his right hand,<sup>13</sup> Khattab made his way to the war-torn, post-Soviet republic of Tajikistan. Here he fought on the side of Said Abudullo Nuri's Islamic opposition to the 'Communist-unbeliever' government that had inherited control of the country with the demise of the USSR in 1991.

Like countless other young Arabs from the Gulf states Khattab had originally been drawn to the romanticized notion of defending the underdog Afghan Muslims from the atheist Soviet invaders in a glorious *jihad*. This interest first appeared after hearing the taped sermons of a firebrand named 'Abdullah 'Azzam. 'Azzam, a Palestinian scholar of Islam who earned a PhD from Cairo's prestigious al-Azhar Islamic University, was responsible for reviving and redefining the concept of *jihad*.

As the Afghan conflict began to wind down in 1988, 'Azzam began to call for the creation of transnational brigades to defend threatened frontline Muslim communities around the world.<sup>14</sup> Following the defeat of the Soviets, the extremists of the so-called *Ansar* (Arabic, 'Companions' i.e. the original proselytes/fighters for the Prophet Muhammad in the struggle for Mecca) Brigades or 'Azzam Brigades came to believe in the divine nature of their global mission.

Since 'Azzam's death in 1988, his devout/fanatical adherents have carried out his 'sixth pillar' of Islam in far flung 'lands of *jihad*,' from the Philippines to Bosnia. The shocking full scale invasion of Chechnya by Russian forces in 1994 no doubt appeared to these professional infidel-killers to be a replication of the USSR's attempt to subjugate brutally the free Muslim people of Afghanistan. As the fame of the Chechen resistance spread in the Middle East many Arabs came to idealize the Chechens. As will be demonstrated even 'Usama Bin Laden,

a relatively unknown Saudi exile living in Sudan at this time, admired the Chechens and identified their struggle for self-determination as a struggle between Islam and the Unbelievers.<sup>15</sup>

### ***Jihad in the Caucasus: grafting the concept of holy war to the Chechen conflict***

When Khattab saw the televised images of the lightly armed Chechens, it became apparent to him that the 'Russian *kafirs*' (infidels) who had been humiliated by Allah's vanguard in the Afghan conflict, were once again waging brutal warfare against the *ummah* (world community of Muslim believers). He thus made surreptitiously his way to the inaccessible southern mountains of Chechnya via the neighbouring Russian republic of Dagestan with eight fellow *mujahidin* in February 1995. This small reconnaissance-fighting band (whose fighters were originally seen as an oddity by the secularized Chechens who nonetheless appreciated their assistance) became the nucleus for an International Islamic Brigade that was modelled on Barbaros' Bosnia-based brigade.

As the Chechens' uneven struggle became a *cause celebre* in radical circles in Europe, America and the Middle East, scores of Arabs, Turks, Pakistanis and others made their way at great risk to the encircled republic to join Khattab's unit.<sup>16</sup> The dangers involved in this enterprise were vividly demonstrated when several Arabs were killed or arrested on their hazardous journeys to Chechnya, which was controlled on three sides by Russian forces. The only way to enter the Chechen enclave was to partake in a perilous hike over the helicopter-patrolled Caucasus Mountains via neighbouring Georgia or to roll the dice and attempt to bribe one's way through Russian forces in neighbouring Dagestan.

With funding that came from Salafite or 'Wahhabi' NGOs and charities in the Gulf states (such as *a-Haramayn*) those Arabs who did make it to Chechnya lost no time in making a financial and military contribution to the Chechens' cause. When the Kremlin learned of the presence of a small band of Arabs fighting in the ranks of the Chechens they sensed a propaganda victory. The Chechen 'bandit formations' gradually came to be described by Kremlin spokesmen as 'Arab-controlled terrorists' during the final stages of the war.

While the Kremlin's claim that there were 6,000(!) Arabs fighting on the side of Dudayev's forces was extremely inflated, Paul Tumelty points out there were only eighty foreigners from North Africa, Turkey and the Arab world fighting in Khattab's international unit in the first war.<sup>17</sup> (This is within the ranks of a Chechen force that could field as many as 8,000 men for large offensives during the first war.) Of far more importance than their actual military contribution to the Chechens' cause in a numeric sense (which modestly resembled the impact that the Afghan-Arabs had in Afghanistan and Bosnia) was the Chechen-Arabs' role in radicalizing elements in the Chechen armed forces after coming under the influence of Khattab's spiritual adviser, Abu 'Umar al-Sayyaf. One can surmise that the seeds of Chechen terrorism came to be planted at this time,

for the Afghan-Arabs had always considered terrorism to be a legitimate component of their total war against the infidels.

The highly motivated foreign volunteers also played a key role in teaching the Chechens the tactics of Afghan-style guerrilla warfare (i.e. the use of remote-controlled mines to destroy APCs, ambush strategies, hit and run tactics, assassination stratagems etc.) and funnelling funds from extremist charities in the Middle East to Islamically minded fighting units in Chechnya. Ilyas Akhmadov the former Foreign Minister of Chechnya told me bluntly 'I did not personally like Khattab and his foreign fighters, but they did make a great contribution to our struggle by teaching us the tactics of the Afghan guerrillas. For that I thank them, but I wish they had limited their contribution to military training.'<sup>18</sup>

However, the foreign Salafites in Chechnya did not limit themselves to fighting any more than they had in Bosnia or Kashmir where they found the local Sufi customs to be similarly heretical. Among the foreign fighters the *Qur'an* was never far from the Kalashnikov and on occasion they were even known to murder local Sufi *sheikhs* or intimidate local women who did not wear veils. For this reason Hasan Baiev, the surgeon who amputated the Chechen warlord Shamil Basayev's foot in 2000, told me that most Chechen commanders did not allow foreign fighters in their ranks and many average Chechens feared them.<sup>19</sup>

Impressionable young Chechen fighters who were in need of a spiritual revival were nonetheless drawn to the *da'wa* (religious proselytization) of the wealthy holy-fighters from abroad. The Arab *jihadis'* blind belief in the divine nature of their holy war and their fearlessness in battle attracted many. And the foreigners' seemingly bottomless source of funding also appealed to the post-Soviet Chechens who were in search of spirituality, a sense of *esprit de corps* and most importantly survival in their struggle with the Russians.

Chechen fighters who joined the so-called *Vakhaby* ('Wahhabi') platoons led by Khattab not surprisingly began to emulate their Arab Salafite or 'Wahhabi' comrades-in-arms after coming under the influence of Khattab's spiritual adviser, Abu 'Umar al-Sayyaf.<sup>20</sup> Many began to grow bushy 'Wahhabi' style beards and to ostentatiously practise fundamentalist-style Islam (much to the chagrin of the majority of Chechen Sufi traditionalists who saw 'Wahhabism' as an alien, 'New Age religion' that threatened their people's moderate form of Islam). Arabs and Chechen 'Wahhabis,' for example, renounced alcohol, cigarettes, *dhikrs*, wedding celebrations etc., and were known to pray five times a day under the leadership of *imam*-chaplains even in the heat of battle. With their green headbands emblazoned with the words '*Allahu Akbar*,' 'Wahhabi' Chechens who joined the Islamic *jama'ats* (Arabic 'community,' but in this context 'platoons') were transformed into ascetic warrior-fanatics who now considered their former Russian neighbours to be *kafirs* (infidels).

While the vast majority of Chechen fighters, including Aslan Maskhadov, the Chief of the Chechen General Staff, Akhmad Kadyrov, the Chief *Mufti*, who was a defender of Chechen Sufism against 'Wahhabism,' President Dudayev and powerful regional warlords, such as the Yamadayev brothers, continued to



define themselves as secular-nationalist fighters, several of the Chechen field commanders appear to have allied themselves with Khattab's *jihadis*.

Most prominent among these was the most flamboyant and successful Chechen *abrek* – war leader, Shamil Basayev. Basayev, the daring commander who saved the seemingly helpless Chechen cause by leading a suicide-terrorist squad in seizing Russian hostages in the Russian town of Budennovsk in 1995 (thus forcing the Kremlin to grant a ceasefire reprieve for the hard-pressed Chechens) was wildly popular among Chechnya's *boyeviki* (fighters).

Following Khattab's ambush at Yarysh Mardy, Basayev publicly declared Khattab to be his 'brother.' Khattab seems to have subsequently lived for a while with Basayev's father, Salman, in their family home in the remote mountain village of Dyshne Vedeno. For Khattab who had, like many of his brotherhood, renounced his family and nationality, Chechnya thus became a homeland consecrated by the blood of Arab 'martyrs.' It was now *Dar al Islam* and protecting this land that had given birth to his Daghestani wife and children was *farz* (religious obligation).

As Khattab's influence increased following his alliance with Basayev, the war came to a victorious conclusion for the Chechens in 1996. While many moderate Chechens called for Khattab to depart to other lands following the withdrawal of the Russian forces, he seems to have developed other ideas. Most ominously, the Chechen victory was seen by Khattab and his fellow 'Azzam *jihadis* as yet another sign of their invincibility and the divine nature of their global mission. And this mission was now defined as taking the *jihad* from its defensive to the offensive stage. In the North Caucasian context this meant spearheading an assault designed to expel the Russians from the *Dar al-Harb*, 'the Realm of War,' namely the neighbouring Russian Federation republic of Daghestan.

### **Training for the never ending holy war: the establishment of *jihad* camps in Chechnya**

Following the Chechen surprise urban assault on the Russian forces holding Grozny in 1996, a humiliated President Yeltsin was forced to withdraw Russian forces from the rebellious 'Chechen Republic of Ichkeria.' Having been granted de facto independence by the Kremlin in the Khasavyurt Agreement of 1996, the Chechen 'terrorist' nation showed its true colours by overwhelmingly electing as its new president the moderate head of the Chechen army, Aslan Maskhadov.

Maskhadov, a secular-pragmatist who favoured the establishment of peaceful relations with Russia, trounced the militantly anti-Russian Basayev in Chechnya's 1997 elections. While Basayev the hero of the Chechen conflict was to continue to dream of acquiring power, the majority of the war weary Chechen people feared his uncompromising approach towards Russia. This was to lead to a power struggle in the republic between the consensus builder Maskhadov and his resentful comrade-in-arms Basayev.

To make matters worse, Maskhadov's central power in the newly independent Chechnya-Ichkeria was further curtailed by other regional field commanders



who refused to decommission their troops when the war ended. In this environment of growing lawlessness (which was encouraged by the Kremlin as a means for undermining Maskhadov's efforts to rebuild Chechnya as a viable secular democracy) a new force materialized that was to unite with Basayev's fighters and bring about the feared reappearance of the Russian army in Chechnya. This force was to operate beyond the parameters of Chechnya's *taip* (clan) system and threaten the old order in the war-torn republic that was faced with 80 per cent unemployment.

This force was to be the Islamic *jam'ats*, which were founded in Chechnya with Gulf Arab money in the final days of the war. In a process that can best be described as the 'Kalashnikovization' of Chechnya's shattered culture, 'Wahhabi' fighting units led by Khattab began to recruit jobless Chechens who had come of age to fight the Russians. Tragically, the Khasavyurt Treaty had not called for the expulsion of the Arab volunteer fighters from Chechnya (as had been the case in Bosnia's Dayton Peace Accords) and these well-funded Afghan–Bosnian veteran militants became a source of instability in impoverished Chechnya.

With funding that came from Qatar, Kuwait, Jordan, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, a certain Sheikh Muhammad Fathi, an elderly Jordanian of Chechen extract who had fought in Afghanistan, attracted unemployed Chechens to the 'Wahhabi'-Salafite faith and radical *jihadi* cause. Using his considerable financial resources, Fathi constructed, for example, a fundamentalist mosque and boarding school for war orphans similar to those built by Arab charities in Pakistan during the Afghan war of the 1980s.

Most inauspiciously, this funding was also used by Khattab to establish the 'Kavkaz' *jihad* and to sabotage a training camp in the grounds of a former school outside the village of Serzhen Yurt, located in the inaccessible Vedeno Gorge in the territory of Basayev.<sup>21</sup>

In this and six other camps in the region, which resembled the Spartan al-Qa'ida training camps of the Jalalabad and Khost regions of eastern Afghanistan (such as Darunta, al-Ansar, al-Khaldun and Hadad Farms), young militants from Daghestan, the Arab Middle East, Chechnya and many other Muslim regions of the Northern Caucasus and Central Asia (Uzbeks and Kazakhs were seen in these camps), enrolled in courses that trained them in the use of explosives, light weapons, ambush tactics and *da'wa* ('Wahhabi' Islamic practices).<sup>22</sup> It should however be stated that Khattab, often seen as the 'connecting dot' between the Chechens and al-Qa'ida, was never a member of Bin Laden's Sudan and Afghanistan-based organization. Arab terrorism expert Fawaz Gerges has analysed the relationship between Khattab and Bin Laden and claims that:

Khattab not only competed on an equal footing with bin Laden, but assembled a more powerful contingent of jihadis than the latter. In the 1990s the two Saudi jihadis communicated with each other and tried to pull each other into their own battle plans, but Khattab and bin Laden had defined the enemy differently and both were too ambitious to accept a subordinate role.<sup>23</sup>

At this time Islamist websites, such as azzam.com showed Khattab and 'Wahhabi' fighters from his group posing with ground-to-air missiles (the photos reveal them with both SAM-7s and the more advanced US-made Stingers) in preparation for the breaking of the Khasavyurt 'truce.'<sup>24</sup> In 1998 Sanobar Shermatova interviewed Khattab in his house in the village of Vedeno that provides insight into this *jihadi* commander's world view during the inter-war period

*In Russia you are considered a world class mercenary but in Chechnya you are considered a hero. How do you see yourself?*

I am neither a mercenary, terrorist nor hero. I am a Muslim, a simple *mujahid* who fights for the glory of Allah. Russia oppressed the Muslims, therefore I came in order to help my brothers free themselves from Russia. They fought against Muslims in Bosnia, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan. I help my brothers.

*Here in Chechnya there is now (1998) peace. What are you doing here now?*

There is no war here, but Russia fights with economic methods. I direct a training centre where young men are taught to use weapons.

*I see you have decorated your walls with cartridge belts.*

I am relaxed when they are at hand. One can only have peace when a weapon is nearby.

*Have you had military training?*

No, for me school was Afghanistan.

*During the war they say you personally tortured captured Russian soldiers.*

*Is this true?*

No this is propaganda. In my brigade we did not touch one captive. I myself personally gave five soldiers to their mothers.<sup>25</sup>

*What sort of family do you come from, do you have a peace-time profession?*

My family is moderately prosperous, perhaps wealthy. I am a soldier of Allah, I know no other profession.<sup>26</sup>

As this and several other interviews indicate, Khattab did not consider his Manichean *jihad* with Russia to have been finished by the 1996 Khasavyurt 'truce' anymore than the Russians did. Increasingly his operations were linked to those of local 'Wahhabi' fundamentalists in central Daghestan who began to coordinate training in Khattab's camps for the commencement of an all-out war designed to liberate Daghestan from 'infidel Russian rule.'

By 1997 a situation that bordered on anarchy existed in Western Daghestan as Khattab's bands of Chechen, Daghestani and Arab *jihadis* shot at Russian army and MVD (Interior Ministry) units based in the Daghestani city of Buinaksk and launched more than eighty attacks on federal border posts. Alumni from his school also smuggled weapons to local Daghestani 'Wahhabi' fundamentalists who had declared their villages in central Daghestan (Chabanmakhi, Kadar and Karamakhi, the latter being the home of Khattab's wife) a *shari'a* zone.<sup>27</sup>

During a particularly ferocious attack on the 136th Motorized Infantry Brigade based in Buinaksk, a close friend of Khattab's, Abu Bakr 'Aqida

(probably a *nom de guerre* referring to the first Arab Caliph) was ‘martyred’ and his warrior’s epitaph, online stream video footage and photos were featured on azzam.com’s ‘Stories about the Jihad and the Mujahidin.’ This martyrdom epitaph is illuminating and provides insight into the largely unexplored world of foreign fighters in Chechnya. The sections that I highlight below also make it clear that transnational *mujahidin* fighting in Chechnya often moved in the same circles as those who joined ‘Usama bin Laden’s terrorist organization:

On the 22nd of December 1997, the foreign Mujahideen in Chechnya under the command of Ibn-ul-Khattab led an attack on a Russian Army Base in Daghestan. This attack was successful, Praise be to Allah, and claimed the life of one brother, who to the Mujahideen was widely loved and respected. The name of this brother was Abu Bakr Aqeedah. May Allah accept him from amongst the *Shuhadaa’* [martyrs]. But as for those who are killed in the Way of Allah, never will Allah allow their deeds to be lost.’ Quran, Surah Muhammad (47), Verse 4.

After he graduated in the late 1980s, he left for the Jihad in Afghanistan at the age of 25. He stayed there fighting the enemy and defending Muslim lands and gaining military experience to add to his technical expertise. One-and-a-half years later, he lost one of his legs below the knee when he stepped on a mine during an operation in Jalalabad.

After a temporary artificial leg was fitted to his body, he returned to Afghanistan and continued to fight and train the brothers there. ... Amongst other training camps, he was a military trainer in the camp of *Shaheed* [martyr] Sheikh Abdullah Azzam for two years ... Abu Bakr continued to fight in Afghanistan until the Soviets were expelled in 1989. When the Communists were defeated as well, he proceeded with Ibn-ul-Khattab and a handful of other brothers to Tadjikistan and fought there for some time.

When activities in Tadjikistan subsided, he finally proceeded to Chechnya to join Ibn-ul-Khattab who had arrived there a little earlier. Two years he stayed in Chechnya, participating in all the numerous military operations with Ibn-ul-Khattab, including those which earned Khattab the nickname, ‘The Lion of Chechnya.’ After the temporary peace deal was signed in Chechnya in the autumn of 1996, Abu Bakr continued to learn and to train Mujahideen. In the early hours of Monday morning, 22 December 1997, Abu Bakr Aqeedah participated in an attack on a Russian Army Base in Buinaksk, Daghestan with his artificial leg.

He was killed during the first few minutes of the operation, whilst he was facing the enemy, not fleeing from them. ... During the initial stages of the attack, once the Mujahideen had gained control of the entire Russian Army base, Abu Bakr Aqeedah was placing an electrical booby trap on one of the new Russian battle tanks. Whilst he was doing this, he was shot by a bullet in his back. Abu Bakr fell down on the floor. However, despite being moments away from his soul leaving his body, Abu Bakr managed to

struggle towards the circuit and complete it. His soul left his body and moments later the tank on which he had set the circuit exploded. He was aged 36.

He had attained the prize of *Shahadah* after spending eleven years, one third of his life, in Jihad for the Pleasure of Allah. We ask Allah to reward him for his efforts and to enter him into the highest part of His Paradise. *The aspect of this brother which was most impressive was his vast knowledge coupled with his humility. He was chosen out of ALL the Mujahideen in Afghanistan to write the sections on explosives in the famous Arabic nine-volume Afghanistan 'Encyclopedia of Jihad.'*

He was once jokingly referred to as the 'most wanted and dangerous man in Chechnya' by commanders like Ibn-ul-Khattab, Shamil Basayev and Salman Raduyev. Even though Abu Bakr was known and regarded by the Mujahideen as one of the most knowledgeable and experienced commanders in the world, his skills and expertise did not leave with him ...

O Abu Bakr! We have not forgotten the harsh Chechen winters that you passed without complaint, whilst we were relaxing in fully-heated dwellings. O Abu Bakr! The land of Afghanistan has not forgotten those parts of it on which your blood was spilt when you were injured in Allah's Way, whilst many of us did not even spend a single drop of blood in the Land of Jihad.<sup>28</sup>

Young Arabs throughout the Middle East and Europe thrilled to online azzam.com propaganda accounts like this that painted the heroic struggle of Khattab as a religious adventure.<sup>29</sup> And Arabs in the Middle East were not the only ones inspired by Khattab's vision. Shamil Basayev himself increasingly subscribed to Khattab's dream of liberating Daghestan as a means for overthrowing Mashkadov and creating a supra-ethnic Imamate. As Khattab's *jihadi* forces coalesced around those of the failed contender Shamil Basayev and former interim president of Chechnya, Zelimkhan Yanderbiyev, the Chechen Republic faced the prospect of civil war.

This division in Chechen society was increasingly between the vast majority of moderate Sufi Chechens who had granted Aslan Maskhadov 67 per cent of the popular vote in the election, and the increasingly feared, but powerful, 'Wahhabis.' In this chaotic situation, the Islamic opposition tried to overthrow President Maskhadov's secular government by taking over the city of Gudermes in July 1998, but the government forces led by the anti-'Wahhabi' Yamadayev brothers drove them out. Maskhadov was emboldened by this victory to ban 'Wahhabism' and attempt to expel Khattab, but backed off after several assassination attempts. Maskhadov also feared the prospect of a destructive civil war if he moved too harshly against foreign fighters and their local allies.

In desperation Maskhadov even warned the Russians of the possibility that the transnational terrorists operating in the mountains beyond his control might invade Daghestan in 1999. For despite the simplistic media claims that 'Chechnya' invaded Daghestan in the summer of 1999 (the incursion that gave the Kremlin

its *casus belli* to re-invade the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria), Chechnya's official government had nothing to do with this dangerous provocation.

As was the case in Afghanistan, where Bin Laden and his International Islamic Brigade had similar macro objectives, which often clashed with that of their tribal Taliban Afghan hosts (or their Northern Alliance foes!), Maskhadov's *jihadi* opponents in Chechnya had wider plans than those envisioned by the local population.<sup>30</sup> In the Islamists' words, their goal was 'the creation in the Caucasus of an Islamic Republic which will include Ichkeria, Daghestan, Kabarda, Balkariya, Ingushetiya, Karachayevo-Cherkessia and Azerbaijan,' together with 'the creation of a 'corridor' on the territory of Daghestan connecting Chechnya with the Caspian and Azerbaijan, the separation of Daghestan from Russia, Daghestan's reunification with Chechnya and the proclamation of an 'imamate.'<sup>31</sup>

As Khattab's Arab-led *jihadi* sabotage and ambush platoons began to carry out increased bombings and cross-border raids into Russian Daghestan,<sup>32</sup> his goals increasingly began to mirror those of Juma Namangani, an Uzbek militant who began raiding Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan from Taliban-controlled northern Afghanistan in 1999. As Namangani's Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) was submerged into 'Usama bin Laden's global terrorist movement it became increasingly radicalized and came to resemble similar regional, al-Qa'ida linked *jihadi* groups, such as the Pakistani-sponsored Kashmiri *jihad* group, *Harakat ul-Mujahidin*. In light of the irrefutable direct and open ties between Namangani's Afghan-based IMU, *Harakat ul-Mujahidin* and other radical groups, such as Ayman al-Zawahiri's Egyptian Islamic *Jihad* to al-Qa'ida, some have sought to link directly Khattab's Serzhen Yurt-based International Islamic Brigade to 'Usama bin Laden. But few have subjected this widely acclaimed nexus between al-Qa'ida and the foreign *jihadis* in Chechnya to careful scrutiny.

### **Critically assessing al-Qa'ida links to foreign fighters in Chechnya**

While Khattab admitted in interviews to having known and respected 'Usama bin Laden during the anti-Soviet *jihad* in the 1980s, he vehemently denied any continuing operational contacts with his former comrade-in-arms from Afghanistan.<sup>33</sup> Tellingly, Khattab's Islamic Battalion was also not a signatory to Bin Laden's 1998 World Islamic Front for *Jihad* against Jews and Crusaders.

But we do know that al-Qa'ida sought out contacts with *jihadis* in Chechnya, many of whom were personally known to Bin Laden and other al-Qa'ida leaders from the Afghan war. It is interesting to note that Ayman al-Zawahiri, a ruling member of the al-Qa'ida *troika*, for example, subsumed his group into Bin Laden's organization only after having made an exploratory journey to Daghestan where he hoped to link up with local Islamic extremists. Zawahiri's aim, it is claimed, was to establish a headquarters for his battered Egyptian *jihadi* organization in the breakaway Republic of Chechnya or the semi-independent

'Wahhabi' zones of neighbouring Daghestan. Although his mission failed (he was arrested and kept in jail for six months in 1997), this is one of the closest to direct links we have between al-Qa'ida and *jihadis* in Chechnya.<sup>34</sup>

There are other tangential links between al-Qa'ida and the foreign *jihadis* in Chechnya during the interwar period (1996–99). Footage of an Arab *jihadi* ambush on a Russian patrol in Chechnya (probably carried out by Khattab's media savvy Islamic Battalion) and images of Khattab in combat were, for example, featured in an al-Qa'ida recruitment video found in Afghanistan by coalition forces after 9/11. In addition, 'Usama bin Laden appears to have sponsored Arab *jihadi* holy warriors at a cost of \$1,500 each to go to Chechnya and fight in Khattab's brigade during the First Russo-Chechen War.<sup>35</sup>

Most importantly, I have systematically analysed the backgrounds of extremists involved in al-Qa'ida terrorism and have found that many of them had previously fought *jihad* in Chechnya before drifting into Bin Laden's movement (interestingly none of these al-Qa'ida terrorists were ethnic Chechens themselves, most were Arabs or Turks).<sup>36</sup>

Foreign *jihadi* veterans of the war in Chechnya, whom I label 'Chechen-Arabs,' were, for example, involved in: the November 2003 al-Qa'ida bombings in Istanbul; in the 9/11 attack on the US;<sup>37</sup> in the bombing of the USS Cole in Aden; in trying to ship Russian SAM-7 missiles to al-Qa'ida operatives in Europe; in the May 2003 bombings in Riyadh; in attempts to develop ricin labs in London; in efforts to launch terrorist attacks against Western targets from the Pankisi Gorge in Georgia;<sup>38</sup> in the Madrid 2003 bombings.<sup>39</sup> In other words, it appears as if the experience of killing Russian 'infidels' in Chechnya produces an appetite for murdering 'enemies of the faith' that makes 'Chechen-Arabs' perfect recruiting material for al-Qa'ida terrorism.<sup>40</sup>

This sort of extremist involvement in the Chechen cause is not, however, in and of itself cause for claiming that al-Qa'ida controls the foreign fighters in Chechnya (much less the local Chechen insurgents). And any discussions of 'Usama bin Laden having personally visited Chechnya or having had direct meetings with Khattab or Basayev in the interwar years must also be considered a flight of fancy. For the most part the interest in the Chechen struggle by Arabs (including bin Laden), who romanticized their war, was one way.

There were, however, a few efforts on the part of the extremists in Chechnya to link up with radicals in the Middle East and Central Asia. For example, in January 2000 the Islamist radical opponent of Aslan Maskhadov, former interim president Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev, made a visit to Afghanistan where he met the Taliban leader Mullah Omar. Yandarbiyev also toured Pakistan's radical mosques for three weeks to raise funds for the Chechens and established links with Pakistani *jihadi* militant groups there.

Of greater significance was the trip of Basayev to Pakistan and Afghanistan in 1994. Basayev has admitted to having briefly trained in Pakistan and Afghanistan on the eve of Russia's 1994 invasion of his homeland. A typical account of this episode states:



Top Chechen field commander Shamil Basayev twice visited Pakistan to organize a string of military training camps for his fighters in the neighbouring Afghanistan, investigators and Arab sources said. Shamil soon after his arrival from Baku, capital of Azerbaijan, stayed for a few days in Peshawar before moving across the Pak-Afghan border into Afghanistan to oversee training arrangements at Al-Khaldun camp in Khost. . . . He left immediately soon thereafter only to return again in May to make arrangements for a group of 40 Chechens to take military training in Afghanistan.<sup>41</sup>

In a September 2003 interview with the *Globe and Mail* Basayev claimed:

I was interested in the Afghan experience on the defence engineering constructions, air defense system and mine-explosive works. Therefore, I went first to Peshawar (Pakistan). There, I lived with some Tajiks and through them I agreed for training for 200 Chechens. I sold at home some captured weaponry, seized in June from Labazanov's band in then Grozny, took also some money from my acquaintances and transported the first group of 12 people to Afghanistan. There I spent a night in the training camp and in the morning I returned to Karachi to meet the second group. But at the airport they aroused a suspicion because of their number and they didn't have their passports in their hands. The Russians raised a large noise and in the week they sent us back.<sup>42</sup>

But for all of its significance, it is important to note that Basayev's trip took place in 1994, i.e. two years before 'Usama bin Laden returned to Afghanistan from the Sudan to take control of these training camps.<sup>43</sup> While the claims that Basayev has direct links to al-Qa'ida camps in Afghanistan are therefore anachronistic, it seems probable that Basayev invited the Arab *ihadis* to Chechnya following this brief trip. And one cannot overestimate the destabilizing impact of the foreign *ihadis* would come to play in Chechnya as they sought to transform it into a springboard for spreading their holy revolution. For as events would later demonstrate, Khattab and his foreign fighters spearheaded the provocative *jihadi* invasion of Daghestan in 1999 that brought the calamitous Second Russo-Chechen War down upon the people of Chechnya before they had a chance to enjoy their independence.

### **The role of foreign fighters in the Second Russo-Chechen War**

There has been much discussion about the 'Chechen' invasion of the multi-ethnic Muslim republic of Daghestan and the legitimate nature of Russia's overwhelming response to this threat to its territorial integrity. But such analyses are usually lacking in nuance and dangerously simplistic. Basayev and Khattab's unauthorized incursions into Daghestan were actually carried out under the black *Sayf al-Din* ('the Sword of Religion' (i.e. Islam)) banner, which is the flag



of the international *jihad* movement (al-Qa'ida insurgents in Iraq for instance fight under this banner). Noticeably missing from the video footage of the bearded *jihadi* warriors seen shooting down Russian helicopters and clashing with Russian federal forces during the August and September 1999 invasions of Dagestan was the Green Wolf Banner of the Chechen nationalists.

If the Russian federal response to this extremist provocation had subsequently been limited to a targeted campaign on the rogue *jihadi* elements in Chechnya, then all-out war with President Maskhadov and the Chechen nationalists might have been avoided. Tragically, the Kremlin did not, however, attempt limited surgical strikes on Khattab's bases or *desantniki* (paratrooper) assaults on his redoubts in the mountains. This at a time when thousands of war-weary Chechens were partaking in Maskhadov-led rallies in Grozny disavowing Basayev and Khattab's reckless invasion of neighbouring Dagestan.

Had the Kremlin tried to act in concert with Maskhadov, who finally had the widespread support required to come out completely against Basayev, then total war with the Chechens might have been avoided. But, as becomes apparent, the Russian objectives were not limited to expelling the foreign fighters from Chechnya. Their real goal was the destruction of Chechen independence.

In this aspiration the Russian federal forces outdid themselves. They did so by carrying out their own October 1999 to February 2000 version of America's subsequent 'Shock and Awe' assault on Iraq (and similarly defined their attack on Chechnya in reductionist terms as a 'war on terrorism'). By March 2000 most of Chechnya was overrun by a much larger federal force than that deployed at the beginning of the First Russo-Chechen War.<sup>44</sup>

But if the Kremlin's goal was, as stated, 'to defeat international terrorism in Chechnya' then its policy of total war on the Chechen people backfired tragically. Far from undermining the unpopular foreign *jihadi*-terrorist element in Chechnya and de-linking it from Maskhadov, the clumsy Russian assault drove most of the Chechen government into a tactical alliance with Khattab and Basayev.<sup>45</sup> While many elements in Chechnya, such as the Gudermes-based militia of the Yamadayev brothers and the *Mufti*, Ahmed Kadyrov, declined to fight alongside Basayev, Khattab and the 'Wahhabis,' many Chechen fighters did so.<sup>46</sup> It was widely recognized that no leaders were better equipped to defeat the Russians than Basayev and Khattab.

Khattab's Arab fighters were subsequently seen fighting against much larger Russian forces in the Khankala sector during the federal army's siege of Grozny. There the bearded Arabs, who wore camouflage fatigues and Arab *kaffiyyas* (head scarves) and drove around in Toyota Hilux pickup trucks (of the sort favoured by Arab fighters in Taliban-Afghanistan), fought an almost suicidal defence. When Grozny finally fell to the Russians after a heroic defence, the Arabs broke out of the encircled Chechen capital with Shamil Basayev and his unit.<sup>47</sup>

Khattab and Abu Walid subsequently carried their wounded comrade, Shamil Basayev, deep into the hills after he stood on a landmine during the retreat from Grozny. Khattab's photographer posted pictures on azzam.com featuring

Khattab tending to the horribly wounded Basayev. Later pictures featured Khattab and his *Naib Amir* (second in command) Abu Walid propping Basayev up between them as he showed off the stump of his right leg.

The next photographs we have are of Khattab, Basayev, Abu Walid and, amazingly enough, President Maskhadov, holding a war council in the spring of 2000. As these pictures make clear, Maskhadov had buried the axe with Basayev in the face of the Russian invasion and had integrated his forces with those of his former enemies. By 2000 Basayev and Khattab had been tasked with defending one of Chechnya's four fronts, the Eastern Front, which faces Daghestan.

But for all Maskhadov's efforts to define the war in frontal terms, Basayev and Khattab were quick to realize that the Russians could only be beaten by employing asymmetrical tactics (hit and run guerilla strikes and terrorism) of the sort used by Hizballah to defeat the Israelis in southern Lebanon. And these tactics increasingly came to include terrorism, a method of warfare Khattab claimed to be a response to Russian state-sponsored terrorism.<sup>48</sup> While President Maskhadov fought to prevent the slippery slide into terrorism, his efforts to control his field commanders were ineffectual and in many ways he came to resemble an Arafat-style figurehead.

By 2000 Chechnya therefore began to experience its first suicide bombings and Russian security forces quickly pointed out the important role that Khattab and Basayev played in such activities. In addition, it appears that the foreigners – who fought in small units such as the *Saifullah* (Sword of Allah) *Cemaat* or the *Osmanli Cemaat* (a Turkish fighting unit made up of as many as forty Turks of Caucasian ancestry)<sup>49</sup> – expanded Khattab's practice from the first war and regularly video-taped their ambushes and distributed these snuff films/*jihad* propaganda to extremist circles in the Middle East and Europe.<sup>50</sup>

But the foreign fighters did not limit themselves to terrorism or ambushes; they continued to send out Algerians, Turks, Egyptians, Britons, Saudis, Frenchmen, Canadians, Jordanians and even one American to engage the Russians in combat. The best evidence we have of this comes from the genre of *jihadi* martyrdom epitaphs that began to appear on the Internet after the start of the Second Russo-Chechen War. The following martyrdom epitaph that appeared on the [kavkaz.org](http://kavkaz.org) Chechen *jihad* web page is typical:

Last night we had news from verifiable sources that a group of Turkish *mujahidin* came across Russian soldiers north of Vedeno in a small village. After stumbling on them a fire fight ensued and one Algerian and three Turkish brothers died. The Algerian's name is Hassam and the Turkish brothers' names are Ebu Derda, Huzeyfe and Zennun. These brothers fought in Commander Ramazan's unit in the Daghestan conflict.<sup>51</sup>

The account of the American-Hawaiian *jihadi*, Aukai Collins, who fought under Khattab gives further insight into these activities. According to Collins' (*nom de guerre* Abu Mujahid) harrowing account, Khattab led a rather undisciplined band of Chechen and international fighters who roamed the hills attacking

Russian positions at night, planting landmines, sniping at *blokposty* (check-points) and fighting to protect the local Chechen Muslims whom they secretly distrusted (largely due to the fact that local elders often made truces with the Russians to protect their villages from retaliation).

The following account of Khattab by Collins is insightful:

Khattab was very polite and unimposing... He was thin, probably from a life in the front lines, but I could tell that he was muscular and would be much bigger in a less stressful environment... I asked him his advice on what I should do in Chechnya and he said I should look around before deciding. He also said I was welcome to join his group. There were a handful of Arabs in his camp but the rest were Chechens... The first days in Khattab's camp [in Zandak south-eastern Chechnya] were nice; I enjoyed being around the Arabs because they were more religious. Khattab had around a hundred guys in his group but only four proper tents for all of them.<sup>52</sup>

But this is one of the last eye witness accounts we have of Khattab who was killed by an anthrax laden letter delivered to him by the FSB (former KGB) in the spring of 2002. His place as 'Commander of the Supreme *Shura* of the *Mujahidin*' in Chechnya was taken by Abu Walid, who was subsequently to acquire great fame for shooting down and capturing the crew of a Russian Mil 24 'Hind' helicopter and bombing the headquarters of the Russian-appointed government of Chechnya in December 2002.

Abu al-Walid was the *nom de guerre* of 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Ghamidi, a Saudi from al-Hal southern Saudi Arabia.<sup>53</sup> At the age of seventeen al-Ghamidi was moved to follow the call of *jihad* to defend the true believers in Afghanistan. Abu al-Walid's calling to wage holy war took him from the snow capped Tora Bora Mountains of Afghanistan to Bosnia and on to the hills of Chechnya where he probably partook in Khattab's Afghan-style ambush at Yarysh Mardy. But Abu Walid was killed in an artillery strike in 2004 and proclaimed a martyr by his Saudi family (which incidentally belonged to the same Al Ghamidi clan that produced two of the 9/11 hijackers and a *sheikh* seen in a video with Bin Laden).

The current leader of the foreign fighters in Chechnya is Abu Hafs al Urdunni (alias 'Amjet') a Jordanian who led a group of approximately eighty Arab and Turkish reinforcements into Chechnya from the Pankisi Gorge in 2002. While Amjet has kept a low profile since taking control of the foreign fighters in Chechnya, he stands out for having received a phone call from Afghanistan on 9/11 predicting the attack on the second World Trade Center.<sup>54</sup> Amjet is thus marked by American and Russian intelligence agencies and one may suspect that his career as an Al-Qa'ida-linked *jihadi amir* in Chechnya will not be long lived.

## Conclusion

Despite the insight provided by these accounts of foreign involvement in Chechnya, we should not make the mistake of over-emphasizing the role of the *jihadi*

fighters in what is essentially a Chechen conflict. While the Kremlin has tried to prove that there were scores of Arabs involved in the Beslan massacre (August 2004) and other terrorist outrages, these Russian reports are all too often Soviet-style *dezinformatsiia*.<sup>55</sup> These attacks in the unstable republics of the Northern Caucasus, such as Ingushetia, Daghestan and Kabardino-Balkaria, have been carried out by local Muslims, not even by Chechens.<sup>56</sup> In other attacks and terror acts the main participants were Chechens, not foreigners.

And this is best seen in the estimates referring to the size of the Chechen resistance. Russian sources usually put the number of insurgents in Chechnya at somewhere between 1,000 and 1,200 and the size of the foreign component in this 'army' is probably no more than 100.<sup>57</sup> And it is clear that the foreign *ihadis* have taken heavy losses in life and limb fighting the Russian 'infidels' in Chechnya (Aukai Collins for example lost a leg fighting the Russians as did the al-Qa'ida terrorist who bombed the USS Cole in Aden).

Most importantly, the November 2005 killing of Sheikh Abu 'Umar al-Sayf, the *imam* (religious head) of the 'Chechen-Arabs' in Daghestan, has removed the *ihadis* movement's primary conduit for *zakat* (tithe) money from the Arab Gulf. If this were not enough, Islamic charities such as *al-Haramayn* Foundation or the Benevolence International Foundation (based in Chicago, USA), which once freely sent funds to the foreign fighters, have been closed down since 9/11.

Most recently it appears that the high mortality rate among *ihadis* fighters in Russian-occupied Chechnya has potential volunteers thinking twice about fighting holy war in this dangerous theatre of action. The presence of American infidels in Iraq has by contrast offered Arab *ihadis* a much more inviting destination closer to home. Arab volunteers from Chechnya have now showed up in Iraq bringing their experience with them.<sup>58</sup> Most foreign fighters are now drawn to Fallujah or the towns bordering on Syria in the Anbar province in Iraq to wage holy war where the odds of being martyred are much slimmer. The July 2006 death of Shamil Basayev, a hero to Arab *ihadis* everywhere, as well as Maskhadov's Arabic speaking successor, President Abdul Khalim Sadulaev, will certainly have a negative impact on recruitment drives for the Chechen *ihadis* in the Middle East.

But for all its setbacks, the *ihadis* movement in Chechnya has proven to be remarkably resilient and its influence among embittered Chechen fighters has been growing. One can argue that the Salafite *ihadis* seed has now taken roots among an ex-Soviet populace that increasingly defines its anger towards the Kremlin in the language of militant Islam. It can thus be argued that the *ihadis*' greatest contribution to the Chechen conflict has thus been in grafting the language and world view of the global Salafite-extremist movement to the isolated Chechens' secessionist struggle. This has come about as a result of the *ihadis*' control of the foreign money (that still makes its way in spurts to Chechen, Ingush, Karachay and Daghestani *cemaats*) and has been facilitated by the Russians' brutal response.

And as the Chechen struggle for independence continues to morph into a holy guerilla war, one can assume that the limited objectives of the nationalists, such

as the slain presidents of Chechnya, Dudayev and Maskhadov (killed in 2005), will continue to be supplanted by macro-visions of a 'glorious' *jihād* that will spread from the Caspian to the Black Sea.<sup>59</sup> Ironically, the Russian role in '*jihādifying*' the Chechen resistance through its continued brutality can only contribute to the long term success of Khattab's dreams of total holy war in the Caucasus. And while no Chechens have been arrested in the global war against Bin Laden's organization thus far, it is only a matter of time before Russia's claims to be fighting 'Chechen international terrorists' in the Caucasus become a self-fulfilling prophecy.<sup>60</sup>

## Notes

- 1 *Mujahidin* is the plural of the Arabic word *mujahid*, meaning men participating in a *jihād*. This was the self-designation – accepted in the West and the Islamic world – of the Afghan warriors who fought the Soviets in the Afghan war.
- 2 Charles Blandy, 'Chechnya. Two Federal Interventions.' *Conflict Studies Centre*, P-29, 1998 p. 20.
- 3 The London based azzam.com had clips from this video available on its photo library section prior to its being shut down by US agents.
- 4 I was shown copies of the video in London's notorious Finsbury Park Mosque, home of Ralph Reid the 'Shoe Bomber' and Zacarias Moussaoui 'the 20th Sept. 11th hijacker.'
- 5 For a different interpretation of Chechen strategy and tactics in the first war, see Chapter 9 in this volume.
- 6 Graham H. Turbiville, 'Ambush! The Road to War in Afghanistan.' *Army Magazine*, January 1988.
- 7 Brian Glyn Williams, 'Jihad and Ethnicity in Post-Communist Eurasia. the Trail of Trans-national Islamic Holy Warriors in Kashmir, Afghanistan, Central Asia, Chechnya and Kosovo.' *Journal of Ethnopolitics*, Vol. 2, Nos 3–4 (March/June 2003).
- 8 After the famous sixteenth century pirate and later Ottoman admiral Khayr al-Din Barbarossa.
- 9 Anthony Loyd, 'Disciples of Holy War Answer Call to Fight and Die,' *The Times*, 21 October 1994.
- 10 Tom Post, 'Help From the Holy Warriors. Inside a Secret Military Camp: How Mujahedin Fighters are Training Bosnia's Muslims,' *Newsweek*, 5 October 1992.
- 11 Contrary to many erroneous accounts, Khattab was not a Jordanian of Chechen descent.
- 12 It should be stated that the tenacious Arabs sustained unacceptably high casualties in the Battle of Jaji, perhaps a testimony to their courage (or fanaticism). Peter Bergen, *Unholy War Inc.* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002), p. 60; Rohan Gunaratna, *Inside Al-Qa'ida. Global Network of Terror* (London: Christopher Husst, 2002), p. 135.
- 13 This bandaged injury later earned him the derisive moniker in the Russian press of 'the One-Armed Ahmed.'
- 14 For an analysis of the Eurasian struggles of Azzam's holy warriors see: Brian Glyn Williams, 'Jihad and Ethnicity in Post-Communist Eurasia.' Available online at: [www.brianglynwilliams.com](http://www.brianglynwilliams.com).
- 15 The extremists, including Khattab who did not know where Chechnya was prior to hearing of Dudayev's struggle, had romanticized notions of the Chechens. Upon arrival in Chechnya, many puritanical Arab jihadists were dismayed to find that Chechen men smoked and drank vodka like Russians, and the Chechen women were comparatively liberated post-Soviet women who 'brazenly' went around without *hijab* (veils).

- 16 Reuven Paz, 'Al-Khattab. From Afghanistan to Dagestan.' 20 September 1999, ICT. Available online at: [www.ict.org.il/articles/articleDet.cfm?articleid=94](http://www.ict.org.il/articles/articleDet.cfm?articleid=94).
- 17 Paul Tumelty, 'The Rise and Fall of Foreign Fighters in Chechnya.' *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. 4, Issue 2 (26 January 2006).
- 18 Interview with Ilyas Akhmadov, Harvard University, October 2003.
- 19 Interview with Hasan Baiev, December 2005, North Dartmouth, Massachusetts. Dr Baiev's book *The Oath. A Surgeon under Fire* (New York: Walker and Co., 2003), provides an insightful account of the role of Arabs and warlords in leading the Chechen people into conflict with Russia and is, in my estimation, the most important book ever written on Chechnya.
- 20 The term 'Wahhabism' refers to the strict, puritanical state-sponsored form of Islam founded by Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Ahab in the eighteenth century in the Arabian peninsula. Those who subscribe to this intolerant form of Islam (which defines the very Sufi Islam that sustained the Chechens' religious identity during the Soviet period as 'heretical') consider localized mystic traditions to be pagan.
- 21 Sanobar Shermatova, 'Tak Nazyvaemye Vakkabity [The So-Called Wahhabis],' in: Dimiri Furman (ed.), *Chechnia i Rossiia: obshchestva i gosudarstva* [Chechnya and Russia: Societies and States], Vol. 3 (Moscow: Mysl', 1999), pp. 408-410.
- 22 Jack Kelley, 'Bin Laden's Camps Teach Curriculum of Carnage,' *USA Today*, 26 November 2001.
- 23 Fawad Gerges, *The Far Enemy. Why Jihad Went Global* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 58. See the letters between Khattab and Bin Laden in 'The Story of the Afghan Arabs.' *al-Sharq al Awsat*, 9 December 2004. When asked about Bin Laden, Khattab described him as 'a good Muslim' but his group not did not join Bin Laden's World Islamic Front in 1998.
- 24 Zagid Varisov, 'Zapad nedootsenivaet ugrozy dlia seb'ia so storony Chechni.' *Rossiia i Musul'manskii Mir*, 2000, No. 1 (91), p. 22.
- 25 This was to change in the second war when Khattab was video-taped executing captured Russians whom he had threatened to kill should a Russian lieutenant charged with raping and murdering a Chechen girl not be turned over to his unit to face *shari'a* justice.
- 26 Shermatova, 'Tak Nazyvaemye Vakhkhability,' p. 409.
- 27 Dimitri Nikolaev, 'Terroristy Zhdut Signala.' *Nezavisimaia Gazeta*, No. 137. 29 July 1999, p. 1.
- 28 Nick Fielding, 'Revealed: the Bloody Pages of Al-Qa'ida's Killing Manual,' *Sunday Times*, 4 November 2001.
- 29 see [www.aeronautics.ru/chechnya/062800.htm](http://www.aeronautics.ru/chechnya/062800.htm).
- 30 Armen Khanbaia, 'Novyi vitok protivostaniia,' *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 13 October 1999 (No. 191), p. 5. While Shamil Basayev was not himself a 'Wahhabi', he allied himself with Dagestanis and Chechens who were *jihadi* Islamists with the aim of circumventing Maskhadov and seizing power in Chechnya and beyond.
- 31 Charles W. Blandy, *Chechnya: a Beleaguered President*, Conflict Studies Research Centre. No: OB 61, August 1998.
- 32 For an analysis of the role of Arab *amirs* in leading Khattab's *jihadi* fighters in bold raids into Russian Dagestan (raids that led to the 'martyrdom' of several of his closest Arab comrades from the Afghan-*jihad*) see: Adam Geibel, 'Khattab's audacious raid (22 December 1997): Prelude to the Second Chechen War.' *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (September 2000).
- 33 'Obituary: Chechen Rebel Khattab.' *BBC World News*, 26 April 2002, 00:05 GMT 01:05, available online at: [news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/1952053.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/1952053.stm).
- 34 Andrew Higgins and Alan Cullison, 'Saga of Dr. Zawahiri Sheds Light on the Roots of Al Qaeda Terror. How a Secret, Failed Trip to Chechnya Turned Key Plotter's Focus to America.' *Wall Street Journal*, 2 July 2002.
- 35 Bergen, *Unholy War Inc.* p. 89.



- 36 Brian Glyn Williams, 'Turkish Volunteers in Chechnya.' *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. 7, Issue 3 (7 April 2005).
- 37 Several of the terrorists involved in 9/11 including Muhammad Atta and its mastermind Khalid Sheikh Muhammad had attempted to join Khattab in Chechnya prior to the attack on the USA: *The 9–11 Commission Report* (New York: United States Government Publications, 2004), p. 149.
- 38 Paul Quinn Judge, 'Inside Georgia's al-Qa'ida Refuge.' *Time Magazine*, 19 October 2002. Available online at: [www.time.com/time/world/printout/0,8816,366217,00.html](http://www.time.com/time/world/printout/0,8816,366217,00.html).
- 39 'Another Al Qaeda terrorist training other terrorists for Chechnya is arrested in Spain.' *Pravda*, 18 July 2002.
- 40 Brian Glyn Williams, 'The Chechen Arabs. An Introduction to the Real Al Qaeda Threat from Chechnya.' *Jamestown Foundation Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. 1, Issue 9 (15 January 2004), p. 1–4. Available online at: [www.brianglynwilliams.com](http://www.brianglynwilliams.com) (under Publications).
- 41 "'Afghan' Chechens in Afghanistan.' *The News*, 17 December 1994.
- 42 The interview can be found along with accompanying photograph of Basayev answering the questions put to him by Mark McKinnon online at: [www.kolumbus.fi/suomi-tshetshenia-seura/shamil.htm](http://www.kolumbus.fi/suomi-tshetshenia-seura/shamil.htm).
- 43 Shermatova, 'Tak nazyvaemye Vakhkhabyt', p. 412.
- 44 In CW2 (the Second Russo-Chechen War) more than 100,000 federal forces were deployed. For a play by play account of the Second Russo-Chechen War from 1999 to 2001, see Brian Glyn Williams, 'The Russo-Chechen War. A Threat to Security in the Middle East and Eurasia.' *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (March 2001), available online at: [www.brianglynwilliams.com](http://www.brianglynwilliams.com).
- 45 The contrasts between Chechnya and Bosnia on this count could not be more glaring.
- 46 Ahmed Kadyrov subsequently became the Russian-appointed leader of the pro-Russian Chechen government and the Yamadayev brothers fought against Maskhadov, Khattab and Basayev on behalf of the Russian forces. This speaks volumes to the level of distrust for the Arabs and Basayev among certain elements among the Chechens.
- 47 Although Khattab himself appears to have redeployed to the mountains prior to this.
- 48 While there was terrorism in the First Russo-Chechen War, most notably Basayev's seizure of hostages in Budennovsk, this sort of activity was more reminiscent of traditional highland *abrekstvo* (raiding) than al-Qa'ida-style mass casualty terrorism.
- 49 Brian Glyn Williams, 'Turkish Volunteers in Chechnya.' *Jamestown Foundation Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. 7, issue 3 (7 April 2005), available online at: [www.brianglynwilliams.com](http://www.brianglynwilliams.com).
- 50 This practice was later imitated by Zarqawi's al-Qa'ida fighters in Iraq who began to display gruesome footage of ambushes on coalition troops in Iraq on their websites.
- 51 Williams, 'Turkish Volunteers in Chechnya.'
- 52 Aukai Collins, *My Jihad* (Guilford CT: Lyons Press, 2002), pp. 56, 57, 66.
- 53 Ibrahim al-Mutawi, 'Masrahi Sabiq Wa-Qa'id Hali li'l-Shishan al-'Arab: "Al-Majalla" Taltuqi bi-'A'ilat "Abu al-Walid" Janub al-Su'udiyya' ['Previous Play-Actor, and Present Commander of the Chechen Arabs; "Al-Majalla" Meets Abu-al-Walid's Family in Southern Saudi Arabia.]. *Al-Majalla*, 16–22 June 2002, pp. 16–19.
- 54 This call to Amjet was traced to him while he was in the Pankisi Gorge by the NSA and used to point the blame for 9/11 on al-Qa'ida.
- 55 One Arab volunteer was, however, filmed among the Chechen terrorists in the Dubrovka hostage incident in Moscow in 2002 and Shamil Basayev admitted that two Arabs were involved in the Beslan attack in 2005.
- 56 See Chapters 6 and 11 in this volume.



- 57 Ilyas Akhmadov, the former Chechen Foreign Minister, indicated that there may have been as many as 200 fighters before the fall of Grozny in 2000.
- 58 Al-Hayyat, 10 April 2003. Abu Sayyaf issued a symbolic *fatwa* offering support for the Iraqi insurgents. It should also be noted that Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, an independent *jihadi* commander of the *Jund al-Sham* organization or *Ansar al-Islam* (until joining al-Qa'ida in 2005), was never in Chechnya or the Pankisi Gorge despite US claims that he was there as a member of al-Qa'ida.
- 59 For a different view, see Chapter 9 in this volume.
- 60 Brian Glyn Williams, 'From Secessionist "Rebels" to Al-Qa'ida Shock Brigades'. Critically Assessing Russia's Efforts to Extend the Post-September 11th War on Terror to Chechnya.' *Comparative Studies on South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (2003), pp. 198–209.