

The 'Martyrdom' of Doku Umarov: A Post Mortem Analysis of the Amir of the Caucasian Emirate

Brian Glyn Williams

There has been considerable speculation that the failure of the Caucasian Emirate to disrupt President Vladimir Putin's pet project, the Sochi Winter Olympics in February, was due to the fact that the leader of this pan-Caucasian terrorist group was dead. The pro-Russian "puppet" president of Chechnya, Ramazan Kadyrov, had previously announced the death of leader Doku Umarov on several occasions. As recently as January 17, for example, he stated "According to our information, Umarov is dead and we are looking for his body" (*Moscow Times*, January 17). He cited several radio intercepts from Caucasian Emirate rebels discussing the death of Umarov and his replacement, but other than that Kadyrov had nothing to prove his accusations. Caucasus observers were reluctant to believe his claim, since Umarov had been declared dead before on other occasions, only to reappear (RIA Novosti, January 17).

Kadyrov's proof of death for his enemy finally came on the afternoon of March 18 in an obituary on the pro-rebel website Kavkazcenter. In a terse statement, this website, run by exiled Chechens with ties to the terrorists in the North Caucasus, stated:

The Command of the Caucasus Emirate officially announced the martyrdom of the Emir Dokku Abu Usman [Doku Umarov]. Dokku Abu Usman went to jihad in 1994, as soon as he learned about the invasion of Chechnya by Russian troops. He gave up his lucrative business in Russia and returned home. Since then, Dokku Abu Usman was forced to leave Chechnya for several months only once, at the beginning of 2000, due to a severe wound. After treatment, he returned home and continued the Jihad...

Dokku Umarov gave 20 years of his life to the Jihad. [His] huge working-capacity, softness and consistency earned him love and respect of ordinary Mujahideen. He enjoyed enormous prestige among Mujahideen all over the world. His opinion was listened to. His word was significant for fighting Muslims (Kavkazcenter.com, March 18).

A jubilant Ramzan Kadyrov, whose father, Akhmad Kadyrov, was killed in May 2004 by Umarov's rebel allies in a terrorist

bombing in Dynamo Stadium in Grozny, subsequently wrote on his Instagram microblog: "The terrorist mouthpiece reports that Doku Umarov is dead! Umarov was killed in a security operation, which I wrote about earlier... Now it is confirmed by the rats themselves" (al-Jazeera, March 18). A vindicated Kadyrov had earlier stated that Umarov had been mortally injured during "security operations" and had died of his wounds as far back as November 2013 (RFE/RL, March 19). The exiled former Chechen foreign minister, Akhmet Zakayev, stated that Umarov may have been killed as far back as the summer of 2013, when his last video statement was released (*Moscow Times*, March 24).

The Russian government has yet to officially comment on the news, but the killing of a rebel commander-turned-terrorist known in the Russian media as "Russia's Bin Laden" is certainly a victory for Vladimir Putin, who rose to power promising to "wipe out the Chechen thugs wherever they are, right up to the last shit house" (*The Telegraph* [London], November 8, 2003). An analysis of Umarov's rise to power over an amorphous, loosely organized alliance of jihadi insurgent *vilayets* (an Arabic word meaning a political region, in this case the small Muslim ethno-republics of the North Caucasus flank) will shed some light on the significance of Umarov's death.

The Rise of a Jihadi Amir

Doku Khamatovich Umarov, who also went by the *kunya* (war name) of "Dokka Abu Usman," was born April 13, 1964 in the village of Kharsenoy, in southern Chechnya. He earned a degree in civil engineering from the Grozny Oil Institute, which was dominated at the time by ethnic Russians who had moved into the republic during the 1944 to 1956 Stalin-imposed exile of the Chechens. Umarov subsequently fought as a commander in the First Russo-Chechen War of 1994-1996, which Chechnya won. In the chaotic years of independence (1996-1999) he served as head of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria's Security Council. In this capacity he supported President Aslan Maskhadov and the Sufi Chechens in their 1998 clash with Wahhabis in Chechnya's second largest city, Gudermes. He was not a part of rogue Chechen commander Shamil Basayev's August-September 1999 incursion into neighboring Dagestan, which provided Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin with a *casus belli* to launch a full-scale invasion of secessionist Chechnya with an army of 110,000 in October 1999.

Umarov fought in the subsequent defense of Grozny by 3,000-4,000 *boyeviks* (rebel fighters) until the end of January 2000. Like many other Chechen fighters, he was wounded during the rebels' hellacious breakout through minefields to

reach the safety of the southern mountains. He then traveled abroad for treatment.

With the killing of moderate Chechen president Maskhadov in 2004, Shaykh Abdul Halim Sadulayev, a theologian-turned-rebel commander from the town of Argun, was promoted to leader of the Chechen rebels. Sadulayev chose Umarov to be his second in command. Sadulayev also ordered Shamil Basayev's Riyadus Salahin (Gardens of Paradise) terror group to end its campaign against Russia, which had led to such outrages as the 2002 Dubrovka Theater hostage-taking in Moscow and the hostage-taking in School Number 1 in Beslan, North Ossetia in 2004 (which was condemned by Umarov). Basayev seemed to have more respect for Sadulayev, the religious scholar, than Mashkadov, the secularist, and subsequently followed his orders and called for a moratorium on hostage and terror strikes against Russians. At this time Sadulayev also made the decision to spread the struggle against Russia, which had morphed into a jihad, to the neighboring ethnic Muslim republics. He loosely organized *jamaats* (religious fighting units) in Dagestan, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria and Karachay-Circassia under his nominal command.

On June 17, 2006, Sadulayev was killed in a firefight with Russians and pro-Russian Kadrovtsy militiamen. The death of Sadulayev, who had brought a halt to Basayev's terror campaign, was, however, to be a strategic mistake for the Russians, as he was replaced by Doku Umarov. Umarov was to re-launch the terror campaign against Russian civilians with a vengeance, except for a brief hiatus designed to thank Russian protestors for marching against Putin in 2012. He was also to continue the policy of working with the various Caucasian *jamaats* or *vilayets* to spread jihadi terrorism throughout the north Caucasus. Most importantly, he was to make the momentous decision to subsume the Chechen struggle for independence into a wider Caucasian jihad against Russia. He officially did this on October 31, 2007, when he declared the abolishment of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria and the creation of the Caucasian Emirate, with himself as nominal *amir* (military commander).

The creation of a loosely organized, pan-Caucasian Islamic state or emirate at the expense of the narrower goal of creating a secular Chechen republic clashed with the goals of exiled Chechen foreign minister Akhmed Zakayev (a secularist living in London) and of Chechen nationalists (the widow of General Dzhokar Dudayev, the first Chechen president, called it a "betrayal" of her slain husband's dream). [1] It also signaled the adoption by Umarov of a more global jihadist rhetoric, even if this was not translated into reality. On one occasion Umarov stated "all those waging

war against Islam and Muslims are our enemies," a far cry from the Chechens' traditional, strict focus on Russia (*The Guardian* [Manchester], November 22, 2007).

For all of Doku Umarov's boilerplate, globalist jihadi rhetoric, which on occasion even mentioned distant Britain, Israel and the United States, the Caucasian Emirate remained a localized insurgent struggle against Russia, not an al-Qaeda affiliate (as in the case of such *bona fide* affiliates as al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, or al-Qaeda in Iraq). Umarov, for example, called on Chechens not to go fight international jihad against the al-Assad Alawite regime in Syria but to instead focus on the struggle at home (see *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, March 29, 2013). To compound matters, the Caucasian Emirate commander of Kabardino-Balkaria back-pedaled somewhat from Umarov's global jihad rhetoric and declared, "Even if we threaten America and Europe every day, it is clear for anybody who understands politics that we do not have any real clashes of interests [with the West]. The people in the White House know very well that we have nothing to do with America at the moment" (see *North Caucasus Weekly*, December 7, 2007). This message was reaffirmed after the April 15, 2013 Boston Marathon bombing, which the Caucasian Emirate disclaimed in a message that stated:

After the events in Boston, the United States, information has been distributed in the press saying that one of the Tsarnaev brothers spent 6 months in Dagestan in 2012. On this basis, there are speculative assumptions that he may have been associated with the Mujahideen of the Caucasus Emirate, in particular with the Mujahideen of Dagestan. The Command of the Province of Dagestan indicates in this regard that the Caucasian Mujahideen are not fighting against the United States of America. We are at war with Russia, which is not only responsible for the occupation of the Caucasus, but also for heinous crimes against Muslims (Kavkazcenter, April 21, 2013).

This is hardly the rhetoric or actions of al-Qaeda-style globalists of the sort that have supported the al-Qaeda associated al-Nusra Front and Islamic State in Iraq and Syria in the ongoing Syrian jihad.

Under Umarov, the flames of resistance to Russia were to spread from the Chechens to Dagestan in the east and to the other small Muslim ethnic republics in the west, especially Ingushetia, even as the war in Chechnya gradually came to an end and was replaced by more targeted raids, or a "silent war" on real or suspected rebels' homes. By the late 2000s, Dagestan in particular had become a scene of violence as Wahhabis from the corrupt, impoverished region carried

out scores of bombings and assassinations against local authorities. These attacks led to harsh crackdowns and arrests of hundreds of young men suspected of being Islamist insurgents and terrorists. The Dagestani news was full of stories of young Islamists or Wahhabis who “went to the forest” (i.e. joined the jamaat rebels) or had their houses besieged and destroyed by Russian security forces (Russia Today, April 21, 2011).

Tragically, Umarov was also to restart the Riyadus Salihin terror war on Russia. Basayev, the group’s previous leader, had been killed in an incident involving a land mine in Ingushetia in July 2006. The terror war re-commenced with the bombing of a high-speed train known as the Nevsky Express traveling between Moscow and St. Petersburg on November 27, 2009. The bomb de-railed the train and led to the death of 26 people. In a sign of the growing importance of non-Chechens in the Caucasian Emirate, the Russian government subsequently charged 12 ethnic Ingush for involvement in the attack on the train (*Kommersant*, January 4, 2010).

Two Dagestani Black Widows, female suicide bombers that have plagued the Caucasus and Russia since the commencement of the Second Russo-Chechen War, then struck with a bombing during rush hour in Moscow’s metro system, killing 40 people on March 29, 2010. One of the bombers was the 17-year-old widow of a slain Dagestani militant who posed with him in a picture holding a pistol before their deaths (BBC, April 6, 2010). Umarov claimed that the bombing was in retaliation for the massacre of Chechen and Ingush villagers who were attacked by Russian Special Forces while gathering garlic outside the village of Arshty. At the time Umarov warned the Russians: “The war will come to your street... and you will feel it on your own skins” (BBC, March 31, 2010).

The Caucasian Emirate stuck again, this time on January 24, 2011 at Russia’s busiest air terminal, Domodedovo International Airport. In this bombing, 35 people were killed and 180 injured by an Ingush suicide bomber. Several of those killed in the attack were foreigners.

In January 2012, Doku Umarov called for a moratorium on terror attacks, but on July 3, 2013 re-commenced his campaign after claiming that the Russians had seen his truce as a sign of weakness. He used the Winter Olympic Games in nearby Sochi, the scene of the final massacre and retreat of the defeated Circassian highlanders in 1864, as a catalyst for the recommencement of his terror campaign. At the time he ordered “all mujahideen fighters in the region and Russia’s other subjects not to allow Satanist games to be held on the

bones of our ancestors, on the bones of many, many Muslims who died and are buried on our territory along the Black Sea” (RFE/RL, March 17).

Such rhetoric was translated into action. On October 21, 2013 a Dagestani Black Widow blew herself up on a bus in the south Russian city of Volgograd, killing seven. This attack was followed by two suicide bombings on December 29 and 30 on a metro station and trolleybus, again in Volgograd, killing 34 people. In the case of the December 2013 bombings, the two Dagestani male bombers issued a martyrdom videotape of themselves, stating that the bombings were a “present” to Putin (BBC, January 30, 2013).

As the February 2014 Winter Olympic games approached, many feared that Umarov would order an attack during this global spectacle, which was Putin’s pet project designed to show a new face of Russia to the world. Despite fears of Black Widows having infiltrated the games, there were no attacks at this event, which cost Russia \$50 billion to stage and protect.

It now seems plausible that the failure to attack the Olympics was due to disarray among the remaining numbers of the Caucasian Emirate who were hard-pressed by Russian security officials. The interregnum period appears to have ended, however, and Umarov has been succeeded as amir by a Dagestani shakhyh who had been chief *qadi* (Islamic judge) of the Caucasian Emirate named Ali Abu Mukhammad. He provided Kavkazcenter with a brief video interview featuring himself wearing an Afghan *pakol* (a felt hat worn as a badge of honor by many Arabs who fought in Afghanistan) and camouflage uniform while sitting next to an assault rifle. In the brief video Mukhammad states in heavily accented Russian: “I am taking responsibility” (Kavkazcenter.com, March 18).

The choice of Mukhammad, an ethnic Avar, as the head of the Caucasian Emirate is significant, and hints at a transfer from the Caucasian jihad’s focus to Dagestan and away from Chechnya, which has seen a tapering of violence due to the “Chechenization” of the war under Kadyrov. Kadyrov created a 5,000 man militia made up of loyalists to his clan and many former insurgents that was used to flush out rebels and “pacify” the region for Moscow. The so-called Kadyrovtsy militia brutally crushed the remnants of the Chechen rebellion by 2009 and Chechnya is now far calmer than neighboring Dagestan which is facing a simmering insurgency. Dagestan was the epicenter of Imam Shamil’s 19th century Sufi jihad against the Russian Empire and is today the scene of almost weekly bombings and assassinations. The choice of Mukhammad may signal an end to the dominance of Chechens in the campaign against

Russia that began in the early 1990s under the secular Chechen leader General Dzhokhar Dudayev. It remains to be seen whether Mukhammad will continue the terror campaign of his predecessor that caused so much damage to the so-called Russian “kafirs” (Arabic for infidels). The continued corruption, nepotism, police brutality and lack of options to express political grievances certainly provide fertile soil for more terror recruits from a region that saw roughly the same amount of Russian military deaths in 2013 as experienced by NATO in Afghanistan that year.

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Notes

1. Dimitri Shlapentokh, “The Rise of the Chechen Emirate?,” *Middle East Quarterly*, Summer 2008.

Where Trafficking and Terrorism Intersect: A Profile of Mauritanian Militant Hamada Ould Muhammad Kheirou

Andrew McGregor

The dramatic occupation of northern Mali by Islamist extremists in 2012 brought a number of otherwise poorly known jihadists to international attention, including 44-year-old Mauritanian Hamada Ould Muhammad Kheirou (a.k.a. Abu Qum Qum). As leader of the Harakat al-Tawhid wa'l-Jihad fi Gharb Afriqiya (Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa [MUJWA]), Ould Kheirou was briefly one of the most powerful individuals in northern Mali.

Background

According to his family, Ould Kheirou was born in 1970 in Lebeiratt, a settlement in Mauritania's southwest Trarza Region, a former emirate just north of the Senegal River (Magharebia, December 10, 2012).

Ould Kheirou attended a Quranic school as a child, eventually developing something of a reputation as a poet in classical Arabic. The Quranic student grew up at a time when Salafist interpretations of Islam were penetrating Mauritania with support and funding from Saudi Arabia.

Eventually, Ould Kheirou became a preacher, known for his provocative sermons in Nouakchott denouncing the “innovations” of traditional Islamic practices in Mauritania. There is little doubt the fiery preacher came to the attention of Mauritanian security services when former president Maaouya Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya initiated a crackdown on Salafists and other opponents of his regime in 2003. Perhaps not coincidentally, Ould Kheirou is reported to have left to join the jihad in Iraq the same year (Magharebia, December 10, 2012).

Joining al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb

Words, however, were not enough for Ould Kheirou, who was arrested in Nouakchott with two other men in 2005 for committing acts of violence against worshippers in a mosque he claimed did not engage in “true Islam” (*Jeune Afrique*, October 3, 2012; Sahara Media, January 12, 2012). Mauritanian Islam is dominated by two Sufi orders, the Tijaniya and Qadiriya, though Ould Kheirou has been