

SHATTERING THE AL-QAEDA-CHECHEN MYTH (PART II):

Exploring the Links Between the Chechen Resistance and Afghanistan
by Brian Glyn Williams

In light of the nature of the unsubstantiated claims of "thousands" of mysterious Chechens serving in the Afghan theater in 2001-2002 (reflected in the total lack of any evidence of even a single Chechen fighting on behalf of the Taliban in Afghanistan, as was demonstrated in part one of this series; see Chechnya Weekly, October 2, 2003), the intelligence community and Western media owe it to themselves to explore the factual origins of the rumors that have transferred anti-Russian Chechen insurgents en masse across the globe to the lands of America's Taliban enemies. This paper aims to explore this murky chapter in Chechen-Afghan history with the aim of providing an honest analysis of the Chechens' bona fide links to Afghanistan. It is hoped that such an investigatory background exercise will shed light on one of the greatest myths of the War on Terror, namely, the fallacious notion that Chechen resistance fighters are in league with Mullah Omar's Pashtun-dominated fundamentalist-Deobandi movement. It is only by critically exploring the murky facts surrounding the Chechen resistance's tenuous links to distant Afghanistan that one can construct an accurate assessment of the rumor mill that has come to portray the pre-existing/localized Chechen insurgency as a recent subplot to the Taliban's efforts to construct a fundamentalist Emirate and play host to Osama bin Laden's al Qaeda movement.

Interestingly, the first evidence we have of Chechens in Afghanistan hardly lends itself to the construction of a linkage between the Chechen insurgents and the movements of Mullah Omar and Osama bin Laden. On the contrary, the first documentation of Chechens in this Central Asian land comes from the period of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (1979-1988). Far from serving as members of Abdullah Azzam and Osama bin Laden's brotherhood of international anti-Soviet jihadis, the Chechens who fought in Afghanistan were fulfilling their "internationalist duty" in the USSR's 40th Limited Contingent invasion/occupation force.

Most notably, Chechnya's secessionist president, Dzhokhar Dudaev, served in this early period as a Soviet Air Force general leading a

squadron of Sukhoi tactical fighter bombers against the Afghan mujahideen and Arab volunteers. In this period, as now, the Russified Chechens were more an example of Homo Sovieticus than Homo Islamicus. The mud walled villages of Afghanistan and the austere Wahhabi towns of Saudi Arabia would have seemed backward lands to these secularized Marxist-Muslims. Far from striving to reconstruct an idealized Islamic past as it was said to have existed at the time of the Prophet Muhammad (the goal of neo-Wahhabi-Salafites, such as Osama bin Laden, and Deobandis, such as Mullah Omar) the Chechens serving in Afghanistan were fighting for a Communist state that aimed to construct an idealized proletarian future.

Most importantly, the Chechens in the Red Army who spoke the lingua Sovietica of Russian would hardly have identified with the Weltanschauung of those Arab-speaking Wahhabi fundamentalists from the Gulf States who spoke the lingua jihadica of Arabic, the language of the transnational proponents of a new endless holy war (the so-called "sixth pillar" of Islam as espoused by Sayid Qutb and Abdullah Azzam that was later redirected against the United States by al Qaeda). On the contrary, the Russified Chechens were known throughout the Soviet period as loyal fighters; many of them (including Dudaev) received medals for their military service to the Soviet Union in World War II and the Afghan conflict.

With the collapse of the USSR in 1991 and the toppling of the Afghan Communist regime in 1992, Afghanistan and Chechnya would subsequently emerge as vastly different post-communist Muslim societies. The ties of conflict that bound the Soviet Chechens (who underwent over seventy years of communist social construction) to the backward Pashtun tribes of Afghanistan (who were virtually untouched by the Soviets' policies) were to be sundered following the Soviet Union's withdrawal from Afghanistan. Secessionist Chechen President Dzhokhar Dudaev renewed them on a different basis in 1994.

With the collapse of the USSR in 1991, Dudaev and his nationalist leadership took advantage of Russian President Boris Yeltsin's offer to the Federal provinces to "seize as much autonomy as they could" to declare outright national independence for Chechnya. (Islam was seen as nothing more than a nationalist symbol by the Sovietized Chechen secular leadership at this time.) As the Russian Federation responded with a policy of brinkmanship, Dudaev is reported to have sent one of his most loyal supporters, Shamil Basaev, and forty of his followers, to Peshawar in Pakistan and to the Khost region of Afghanistan (the Al Khaldun Camp) for military training in 1994. [1] Having fought in the

Afghan theater in the 1980s, Dudaev must have felt that the Afghan mujahideen had the potential to train his own supporters in unconventional guerilla combat techniques.

Basaev stayed in these camps for only a short period of time, according to the testimony of one of the members of his Abkhaz Battalion (a Chechen unit that fought against the Georgians in the 1991-92 Abkhaz conflict). Nonetheless, this training mission has been construed by conspiracy theorists (most notably Yossef Bodansky, the author of a best seller on Osama bin Laden) as the first example of a Chechen-Afghan-al Qaeda conspiracy. [2] It should be recognized, however, that only a small number of post-Soviet Chechen fighters made their way to train in the ISI-run military camps in the Khost region, and that Osama bin Laden was actually living in Sudan at this time (1994). To use this visit as the basis for linking the entire Chechen resistance to the Taliban or al Qaeda at this early stage is to propagate a sloppy or conspiratorial anachronism. It was not until the year 1996 that the Taliban were to conquer this training camp region and grant it to Osama bin Laden for training transnational jihadis in military-terrorist tactics.

As tenuous as these links between a few Chechen fighters and pre-Taliban ISI training camps were, they were subsequently seized upon by the Kremlin as a public relations coup. During the First Russo-Chechen War of 1994-96, for example, the Kremlin began the process of undermining its Chechen opponents by linking them to the increasingly dangerous network of Taliban fanatics and al Qaeda terrorists who began to dominate Afghanistan two years after Basaev's visit. Russian officials even made accusations that 6,000 Afghan mujahideen were fighting as volunteers against Russian forces in Chechnya (an absurd claim in light of the fact that the Chechen resistance then had a maximum of 10,000 part-time fighters), but no Afghan contingents were ever seen in Chechnya by the scores of Western journalists reporting there at the time. While several hundred transnational Arab holy warriors made their way to Chechnya in 1995 under the command of one Emir Khattab to assist the Chechen resistance against the Russians, the evidence of Afghans in the first Russo-Chechen conflict is non-existent.

The traditionally conservative Pashtun tribesmen of Afghanistan would of course have had little inclination to fight for secessionists in the distant Russian province of Chechnya when their own lands were experiencing such turmoil in the period of the Afghan civil war (which ended in 1996).

Similarly, in the aftermath of the Chechen victory in the First Russo-Chechen War in 1996, the people of Chechnya demonstrated to the world that they had a vision for their future that had nothing in common with the medieval religious time warp being forcefully constructed in post-1996 Afghanistan by the Pashtun-Taliban. The Chechens displayed to the world the moderate-secular future they envisioned for their land by overwhelmingly voting for Aslan Maskhadov, a secular pragmatist willing to work with the Kremlin, as president (1997). By contrast, the Pashtun-Taliban leader, Mullah Omar, symbolically wrapped himself in the "Robe of Muhammad" (a cherished Pashtun relic) in Kandahar, Afghanistan, and turned his back on the very Western world with which President Maskhadov desperately sought to establish diplomatic ties.

With the outbreak of the Second Russo-Chechen War in 1999, however, the obvious differences between the secularized Chechen highlanders and the fundamentalist Pashtun-Taliban came to be overlooked (or deliberately blurred) by the Russian leadership. Paranoid Russian officials saw the August-September 1999 invasions of the Russian province of Dagestan by Shamil Basaev, Emir Khattab, and Dagestani Wahhabis as a "Caucasian front" of a much-hyped trans-Eurasian united jihad that was said to be directed from the pariah Taliban state. In particular, Kremlin officials claimed that the 1999 "Chechen" invasion of Dagestan (which was actually condemned by Chechen President Maskhadov) represented the western pincer of an extremist front that stretched across Eurasia, from the Caucasus to Uzbekistan.

In the world of Russian conspiracy theorists there were sufficient grounds for suspecting such a vast conspiracy between the Taliban-sponsored Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) raiders, who in 1999 were creating chaos in Central Asia, and the radical "Chechen" invaders of Dagestan. In Uzbekistan at this time Islamic militants belonging to Juma Namangani's IMU had begun a series of invasions designed to undermine the regime of President Islam Karimov. [3] The Russian government felt that the IMU's raids resembled the incursions from Chechnya into Dagestan. Most alarmingly for the Kremlin, the 1999 IMU forays into Uzbekistan and the Batken region of Kyrgyzstan were launched from Taliban territory in the Mazar-i Sharif area of northern Afghanistan, where Juma Namangani's militant Islamists had found sanctuary.

It should, however, be clearly stated that there is no evidence linking

the August-September 1999 "Chechen" invasion of Dagestan to Namangani's 1999 IMU razzias into Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. While there is abundant evidence that in 1999 the IMU merged with al Qaeda's Afghan-based 055 International Brigade (the 3,000 man Arab, Uzbek, and Pakistani-dominated fighting wing of al Qaeda that was increasingly used by the Taliban in its spring offensives against the Northern Alliance), there is no evidence that Chechens served in this fanatical jihadi shock brigade.

Commonsensical arguments would of course have refuted the notion of the involvement of fighters from the 2,000-3,000 man Chechen Army of Ichkeria in Afghanistan in 1999 or 2000. As the Russian Federal army of 100,000 swept across the sub-Terek flatlands of Chechnya in the fall of 1999 and crushed the outnumbered Chechen resistance in Grozny (in the winter of 1999-2000), the hard-pressed Chechen leadership would have had zero logistical capacity to dispatch desperately needed fighters across Eurasia to join the Pashtun-Taliban or 055 Brigade in their war against the Uzbeks, Tajiks, and Hazaras of the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance.

Additionally, the regrouping Chechen defenders had no logical reason to abandon the defense of their homes and families to fight for the Taliban. Similarly, by the time of the Second Russo-Chechen War, the Chechen fighters--who had successfully stormed such Russian-occupied urban areas as Grozny and Gudermes in the First Russo-Chechen War--would have had little to learn militarily from the unskilled Afghan-Talibs (the anti-Soviet Afghan mujahideen failed to take Jalalabad in their only effort to storm an urban area and the Taliban resorted to bribery to achieve most of their victories).

As events would demonstrate, however, the increasingly isolated Taliban regime could offer the encircled and diplomatically isolated Chechen Republic of Ichkeria token assistance. Notably, in January of 2000 a radical Islamist opponent of Maskhadov, named Zelimkhan Yanderbiev (a former interim Chechen President in 1996 who had severed all ties with Maskhadov), and five aides made an unofficial visit to Pakistan and Afghanistan seeking support for the increasingly desperate Chechen secessionist cause. In Pakistan, Yanderbiev collected US\$200,000 from the radical Jamaat Islami and Jamaat Ulema e Islam organizations, which were also known to have funded Harkat ul Mujahideen military activities in Kashmir. Most fortuitously for the Kremlin spin-masters, on January 16, 2000, the rogue emissary Yanderbiev also visited Mullah Omar in Afghanistan. There, Yanderbiev, who was not operating in any official capacity as a

Chechen representative, went through the almost comical process of receiving official "recognition" of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria from the equally isolated Taliban regime. [4]

The Kremlin seized upon this largely symbolic gesture as "proof" of links between its Chechen secessionist opponents and the pariah Taliban regime. According to one account, Russian President Vladimir Putin "began to see Chechens everywhere" at this stage. By the summer of 2000 the Kremlin was even threatening to bomb the Taliban regime with TU-22M Backfire Bombers and SCUD missiles in retaliation for its supposed support for the Chechen resistance. [5] Kremlin spokespersons also spoke of a counterintuitive "exchange program" that saw "hundreds" of Afghan Talibs make their way to Chechnya to assist the Chechen rebels while "hundreds" of ex-Soviet Chechens traveled in the other direction, to Afghanistan, to hatch plans with Mullah Omar's Pashtun-speaking tribal fanatics.

In response to the increasingly shrill rhetoric about Chechens in Afghanistan coming from the Kremlin, Taliban spokesmen adamantly refuted the claims that there were any Chechens in the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. A top ranking Taliban official declared: "There are no training camps for Chechens or any one else. We challenge them to identify even one." [6] If this statement were not emphatic enough, the Taliban foreign minister, Wakil Ahmed Mutawakil, declared that there were not only no Chechen "bases" in Afghanistan, but no Chechens whatsoever, not even diplomats, in his country. [7]

When informed of Yanderbiev's provocative unofficial visit, an equally disgusted Chechen President Maskhadov declared from his hideout in the mountains of southern Chechnya: "We didn't ask for any military help from anyone, including Afghanistan, because there isn't such a necessity. We have enough forces and means to sustain a full partisan war with the Russian army. There are no Chechen bases in Afghanistan, or in Yemen. We don't need any bases, because during the previous war Russian generals taught our people how to fight." [8]

Most importantly, prior to 9-11 the Clinton and Bush administrations, as well as other NATO governments, uniformly dismissed the Kremlin's rhetoric concerning the existence of Chechens in Afghanistan and Afghans in Chechnya as so much Soviet-style "agitprop" (agitation-propaganda, the specialty of Putin's former employers, the KGB).

And thus things may well have remained but for the fact that the al Qaeda parasite "organization" launched a stunning suicide attack on

the United States of America from the Taliban host state on September 11, 2001. As a reeling Bush administration focused the full might of Centcom on the task of destroying the Taliban regime, Russia's permission was required for basing rights in the "Blizhnee Zarubezhe" of Central Asia (the so-called "Near Abroad," i.e., the former Soviet republics of Central Asia that are considered to be well within Moscow's sphere of military/political influence).

In the aftermath of 9-11, Putin wholeheartedly sided with the U.S.-led Coalition and the Russian military gave its permission for the basing of U.S. forces on its doorstep (most notably in Karimov's Uzbekistan, which was used as a springboard for inserting U.S. special forces and airborne troops into northern Afghanistan). It was at this time that the White House began referring to the Chechens as "al Qaeda terrorists" and, incidentally, declared the anti-Karimov IMU (which had no record of anti-Americanism) a "Foreign Terrorist Organization." Stunned Chechens (and IMU extremist fighters from Uzbekistan, who were soon to find themselves in the U.S. cross-hairs in northern Afghanistan) assumed that a quid pro quo had been granted to the Kremlin (and to Uzbek President Karimov) by the Bush administration, which had once looked on their separatist cause with sympathy (see part one of this series).

In response to this oblique green light from the Bush administration for stepped up attacks on "Islamic extremists" in Chechnya, Russian Federation troops accelerated their zachistki ("cleansing" round-up operations) in "terrorist" villages throughout Chechnya. In other words, in the immediate months after 9-11 the Chechen resistance found itself pressed as never before due to the fact that the West had given the Kremlin carte blanche to ratchet up its ongoing war against Chechen separatism under the guise of playing its role in the war against global al Qaeda terrorism.

It was at this time of stepped up Russian offensives in Chechnya that the Western media (which had previously depicted the Chechens as victims of Russian war crimes) took over the Kremlin's earlier rhetoric and began accusing the Chechens of being in league with the Taliban. In a short time the Western media surpassed the Kremlin in its casual linkage of the Chechen highlanders to the doomed Taliban regime. It soon became an article of faith even among the U.S. military in Afghanistan that (along with the Uzbeks of the IMU, Pakistanis, and Arabs) the Chechens were a vital component of al Qaeda's tough 055 Brigade. The U.S. military began uncritically to produce reports such as the one below:

They have been the stuff of nightmares for Russian troops and now U.S. forces face the prospect of trying to combat Chechen fighters in Afghanistan who have thrown their lot in with Osama bin Laden's al Qaeda network. "There are a hell of a lot of them and they sure know how to fight," one senior American officer said after the conclusion of the recent offensive Operation Anaconda against diehard fighters in eastern Paktia province. The man who led the offensive said that a large proportion of the fighters who chose to fight to the death were non-Afghans.

But Chechen separatists, who have been involved in a fierce war for independence from Russia for the past twenty-nine months, appear to make up the largest contingent of al Qaeda's foreign legion...Following the downfall of his Taliban protectors in Afghanistan, there has been speculation that Osama may now try to seek refuge in Chechnya. "We know the history of the Chechens. They are good fighters and they are very brutal," Hagenbeck said. The general said he has heard of reports out of the Pentagon that a unit of 100-150 Chechens had moved into southern Afghanistan. [9]

Chechens were soon accused of leading the Taliban's defense of Kunduz in northern Afghanistan (sixty Chechens were said to have thrown themselves into the Amu Darya River when this city fell to the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance) and "hundreds" of Chechen "die-hard Taliban fanatics" were said to be fighting in scores of battlefronts throughout Afghanistan. This author has carefully collated these unsubstantiated reports of Chechens fighting on behalf of the Taliban regime against American forces and has come to a stunning numeric conclusion. If the Western media sources, which specifically speak of "dozens," "hundreds," and "thousands" of Chechens fighting against Coalition forces in Tora Bora, Shah-i Kot, Kunduz, Mazar-i Sharif, and even Kandahar, Afghanistan, are to be believed, then there were considerably more Chechens protecting the Pashtun-Taliban thugocracy in distant Afghanistan than defending their own villages, homes, and people in Chechnya.

However, despite a veritable barrage of such accounts, a barrage that continues to this day, not one Chechen has been apprehended by U.S. and Coalition forces in Afghanistan or Pakistan. In my August 2003 discussions with General Dostum, the Northern Alliance general responsible for the destruction of the 055 al Qaeda Brigade in Mazar-i Sharif and Kunduz, he admitted that his anti-Taliban forces had not uncovered a single Chechen among the foreign fighters subsequently

shipped to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, following the November 2001 defeat of the Taliban (although his forces discovered one American, Johnny Walker Lindh, the "American Taliban").

Why then have the Chechens been misconstrued as die-hard anti-Coalition fighters in Afghanistan by both the U.S. military and media? The author has a theory that might shed some light on this mystery. It can be postulated that Sovietized Uzbek foreigners from Juma Namangani's IMU (i.e., Russified Uzbeks from the former Soviet republic of Uzbekistan), who fought in the 055 al Qaeda Brigade, were erroneously defined as "Chechens" by simple Northern Alliance fighters. The U.S. forces in Afghanistan, and Western media sources with no background in the complex ethnicity of this region, uncritically swallowed these local accounts of foreign IMU fighters speaking Russian (a language many Sovietized-Uzbek foreigners from Uzbekistan spoke better than Uzbek) and came to define them as "Chechens."

The following is a typical example of a Western media account of "Chechen Al Qaeda fighters" fleeing Afghanistan that demonstrates this tendency:

In a skirmish at a remote checkpoint, security forces killed four heavily armed al Qaeda fighters Wednesday as the men drove out of a lawless border area near Afghanistan, Pakistani officials said. Three Pakistani security men also were reported killed, the Washington Post reported from Islamabad. Police and military officers said the four al Qaeda fighters, whom they described as Chechens, threw grenades at security personnel who ordered them to stop at a bridge near Kohat in the northwest of the country. [10]

An in-depth background report of this same widely reported "Chechen" attack by the Pakistani agents actually involved in the incident (an ambush that led to the capture and interrogation of an Uzbek, not a Chechen) reveals a completely different story. A reporter for Time magazine who visited the scene of the above mentioned attack did a follow up and left the following report (which did not get the same international coverage):

Niazi (a Pakistani undercover agent) had spent weeks befriending Uzbek al Qaeda fighters, posing as a smuggler who could take them safely into the frontier city of Peshawar. Now he had lured the Uzbeks into the trap. He would drive them into an ambush in which Pakistani police would capture al Qaeda fighters alive. From there they would be

flown away from the nearby Kohat army base to be interrogated by American spooks...When a Pakistani officer approached the van and ordered the driver to get out, the Qaeda man in the front seat stuck a gun in his ribs. As the driver tried to leap out of the van, the Qaeda fighter shot him. In response, all 70 cops opened fire. Two of the Uzbeks hurled grenades and tried to make a run for the boulders, but were cut down by police bullets. Pinned in the crossfire, Niazi never made it out of the backseat. [11]

Erroneous accounts of this sort were disseminated throughout the world--and a small highlander people that had more in common with its Russian neighbors than Arab Wahhabi extremists in the Middle East--became forever linked to the distant Taliban. The linkage has taken on a momentum of its own and even now one encounters accounts of "Chechens" fighting in Afghanistan. In addition, the Chechens, who appear to have acquired the power of ubiquity, have now begun to appear in Western media sources as extremists fighting in Iraq on the behalf of the toppled Baathist regime of Sadaam Hussein.

But for all of the damage this unsubstantiated (and illogical) linkage between the Chechen guerillas and the shattered Taliban regime has done to the Chechen struggle for national self-determination, it is their purported ties to the al Qaeda terrorist movement that have made the Chechens' name synonymous with the dreaded name of Osama bin Laden in the Western media. It is to the analysis of the ties between the Chechen resistance and the global al Qaeda movement that my next article will be devoted.

FOOTNOTES:

1. "Afghan' Chechens in Afghanistan," *The News*, December, 17, 1994. See also "The Taliban Formally Recognizes Chechnya," *Jamestown Foundation Monitor*, January 18, 2000. "Two years ago, in a conversation with the Monitor's correspondent, Chechen field commander Shamil Basaev admitted that he and his fighters had been in Taliban military training camps three times."
2. For a discussion of the details of Basaev's visit to Pakistan and Afghanistan see Sanobar Shermatova, "Tak Nazyvaemye Vakkabity" (The So-Called Wahhabis), in *Chechnya i Rossiya: Obshchestvo i Gosudarstvo* (Chechnya and Russia: Culture and State), ed. Dmitri Furman, vol. 3, Moscow; 1999, p. 412.
3. The Uzbeks who fought in Juman Namangani's IMU were ex-Soviet Uzbeks from Uzbekistan, not Afghan Uzbeks from General Dostum's Uzbek territories in northern Afghanistan.

4. "Taliban Regime Recognizes Chechen Independence," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Newslines, January, 17, 2000, p. 2.
5. Elena Obcharenko, "Poletiat li Nashi Rebiata Bombit Afgan?" (Will Our Boys Fly to Bomb Afghanistan?) Komsomolskaya pravda, May 30, 2000, p. 5.
6. "Taliban Rulers Deny Russian Charges," Associated Press, October 3, 2000. This statement overlooks the fact that there were of course training camps for militant Uzbeks of the IMU in Afghanistan, but these bases were proudly acknowledged by the Taliban as were the camps of the Pakistani Harkut ul Mujahideen.
7. "Taliban. No Chechen Bases," BBC, May 28, 2000, <http://news2.thls.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/world/south>
8. "Maskhadov Denies Chechens Training in Afghanistan," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, May 26, 2000.
9. Chris Otton, "Americans hunt for Chechens in Afghanistan," AFP, March 22, 2002 (reprinted in Dawn, <http://dawn.com/2002/03/22/int12.htm>).
10. "Pakistanis Kill 4 on Border," International Herald Tribune, July 4, 2002, p. 4.
11. Tim McGirk, "Al-Qaeda's New Hideouts," Time, July 29, 2002.

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