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## **Caucasus insurgency: new leader, old tactics?**

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With the death of the leader of the Caucasus Emirate, Doku Umarov in March of this year, and the subsequent appointment of Ali Abu Mukhammed as his successor, it is worth assessing how this change in leadership is impacting on the broader Caucasian insurgent movement, their tactics and intentions as well as their strategy going forwards.

### **Ali Abu Mukhammed and Aslambek Vadalov**

To state that Mukhammed's appointment as the new leader is surprising would be something of an understatement. Indeed, there is little in his background to suggest why he was selected for such a role, as, by his own admission, he has little to no military experience. Indeed, his previous role within the Caucasus Emirate was that of Qadi, in essence the Chief Justice of the Emirate, who would rule in accordance with Sharia Law. And even that role is something of a mystery, as Mukhammed is not a scholar of Islamic law either (which is not entirely unusual among violent Islamist groups, though his own admission of these facts is unusual).

Mukhammed himself initially refused the role, instead suggesting that the experienced commander Aslambek Vadalov (better known as Emir Aslambek) take control of the organisation. Vadalov had fought in what were possibly the very first engagements of the Chechen separatist conflict in the early 1990s, possibly alongside Sheikh Fathi, and later on under the leadership of Ibn al-Khattab's foreign mujahedeen. Therefore, he would have had some knowledge and access to the Chechen rebels' outside backers and supporters, including those linked with Al-Qaeda.

However, Vadalov's own command has not been without incident, or reasons to consider another potential leader in his place. Most notably, a 2010 report from the Kavkaz Center, the online media portal of the Caucasian insurgents, said that Doku Umarov had stepped down in favour of Vadalov. Shortly after this, the website went offline for a period of days, only to issue a "correction" when it came back online, that Umarov had only named Vadalov as a potential successor. Subsequently, a military reorganisation of the Vilayat Nokhchico

14<sup>th</sup> August 2014

(the Chechen wing of the Organisation, which is composed of seven geographical wings across the Caucasus) was undertaken with commanders, including Vadalov, being made to re-swear allegiance to Umarov.

It is not clear precisely what occurred, but reading between the lines it is not difficult to discern that there was some kind of power struggle within the Emirate, one that nearly saw Vadalov installed as leader, but was then subsequently somehow diverted or prevented.

Vadalov has been described variously as a “moderate” and “not influenced by Wahhabism”, but others have noted his rhetoric is firmly rooted in that of a global jihadist and not a Chechen nationalist frame of reference. His precise ideological inclination is therefore somewhat unclear, though given his history it may be reasonable to expect that he has some sympathies with the global jihadist viewpoint, even if he is playing upon those sympathies to aid the Chechen cause first and foremost.

### **Suicide bombings**

One possible reason for the choice of Mukhammed as leader may be his stance on suicide bombings. In a video released on July 2nd, the new Emir spoke forcefully against the use of suicide bombing as a tactic except in specific and narrowly defined circumstances. This is not an entirely unusual position within the Emirate, as it was also the position of Doku Umarov from 2012 until the start of 2014, and an injunction the insurgent groups largely followed.

Mukhammed further clarified and expanded on Umarov’s ban, in particular stating that women should not participate in suicide bombings except to avoid capture where ill-treatment is expected, and that civilians should not be targeted. The argument was couched in moral terms, but also in terms of practical utility and with reference to the example of the Taliban-linked insurgents in Afghanistan. It should be noted that the ban does not extend to military and security personnel, but does cover both targeting civilians and collateral damage on civilians.

### **The Islamic State**

Another reason for Mukhammed’s appointment could be more to do with events in Iraq and Syria than the Caucasus. In June, as ISIS sent shockwaves through the world with the capture of Mosul and unanticipated advances in Iraq, the Emirate nevertheless reaffirmed its

14<sup>th</sup> August 2014

allegiance to Ayman al-Zawahiri, the leader of Al-Qaeda, and directed that Muslims should not support the group.

North Caucasian insurgents have long been involved in the violence in Syria and, broadly speaking, fall under three main factions. The best known of these are the Caucasian faction fighting for ISIS, led by media-hungry Umar Shishani, but there is a further faction aligned with Jabhat al-Nusra, and a third, mostly independent group under the command of Emir Salatudin. The Emirate has had significant issues with establishing any kind of control over the various factions fighting in Syria, which may explain why, despite Jabhat al-Nusra also being an Al-Qaeda affiliate, that Emir Mukhammed has advised North Caucasian groups to remain independent from both them and ISIS.

The choice of Al-Qaeda over ISIS may be for reasons of strategic importance as much as of distaste at their brutal tactics. Unlike Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, Zawahiri has personal links with personalities within the Caucasian Emirate due to his visit to the region in 1996. Furthermore, Umar Shishani is very much an unknown entity to the Emirate, with his background being in the Georgian Army and not any form of fighting in Russia itself.

## **Conclusions**

It is still early days for the new Emir, and thus it is uncertain what longer term direction he will take the Caucasian insurgents in. However, his early statements are suggestive of a greater focus on guerrilla warfare, as opposed to terrorist operations and this may reflect the growing capability of the insurgents, as well as heavy-handed and ineffective repression by Russian security services.

A major obstacle to the group will be uniting the disparate factions fighting in Syria. That will be a longstanding issue that will not be easy to resolve, and the new Emir may regret not taking a more diplomatic and tactful approach in denouncing ISIS.

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14<sup>th</sup> August 2014



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