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THE INSEPARABLE TWINS:
DIASPORA SHISHAN AND
CHECHEN MUWAḤḤIDUN &
JIHADIS IN AL-SHAM

By John R. Haines

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About the Author

John R. Haines is a Senior Fellow of FPRI and a member of its Board of Trustees. He is also Executive Director of FPRI's Princeton Committee.

An active investor and entrepreneur whose current efforts focus on nuclear smuggling and terrorism, in 2010 John co-founded, as Chief Executive Officer, Ionetix Corporation, to develop proprietary particle accelerator and fissile material detection technologies. Beginning his career as a mathematical economist, Haines also spent time professionally in maritime operations and in government.

An honors graduate of Villanova University, where he was the Adam Smith Scholar in Economics, John has been a student of security and intelligence matters for many years. He holds advanced degrees from the University of Pennsylvania, where he was a Fels Scholar, and from the University's Graduate School of Medicine; and from King's College London. He also studied at Stanford and UC Berkeley. A life member of both the United States Naval War College Foundation and the United States Naval Institute, he is also a member of the executive committee of the Friends of the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton.

Haines is author of the FPRI E-Book *A Perfect Storm Ahead? An Exploration of the Risk of Nuclear Terrorism* (FPRI, 2014) and of several FPRI essays. FPRI's Princeton Committee, which he directs, is a monthly forum in Princeton featuring presentations by a mix of FPRI and guest scholars.

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1528 Walnut Street, Suite 610 • Philadelphia, PA 19102-3684

Tel. 215-732-3774 • Fax 215-732-4401

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By John R. Haines

*"Verily, when the time of trials comes, true belief will be in Syria."*¹

-Kitab fadā'il al-shām wa-dimashq
("Book of the Virtues of Syria and Damascus")

*"It's hard to be a Chechen."*²

-Traditional Chechen proverb

The title of this essay is from the title of the English translation of a 1987 novella about the Caucasus by Anatoly Ignat'evich Pristavkin. Its original Russian title is *A little golden cloud spent a night* [Russian: Ночевала тучка золотая. Russian transl.: *Nochevala tuchka zolotaya*]. The translation of all source material is by the author unless noted otherwise.

¹ Alī ibn Muhammad al-Rabā'ī (1950). *Kitab fadā'il al-shām wa-dimashq*. Ṣalāh al-Dīn al-Munajjid, ed. (Damascus: Maṭba'at al-tarraqī), 8 (no. 11) variant nos. 21 & 22. Cited in Paul M. Cobb (2002). "Virtual Sacrality: Making Muslim Syria Sacred Before the Crusades." *Medieval Encounters*. 8:1, p. 43.

² Chechen: Нохчи хила хала ду. Chechen transl.: *Noxçi xila xala dui*. In Amjad Jaimoukha (2005). *The Chechens: a handbook*. (New York: Routledge),

Ethnic Chechens play a critical if underappreciated role in the conflict now raging in al-Sham.³ They include the descendants of late 19th century Diaspora *Shishan* — the Arabic transliteration of "Chechens" — long settled in the region; and more recent arrivals from the North Caucasus, including Chechen *muwahhidun*⁴ of Islamic State or *Dā'ish* (see box insert), and Chechen jihadis of the al-Qa'ida aligned *Jabhat al-Nusra*.⁵

[An earlier essay](#) considered whether Chechen *muwahhidun* might return to the Caucasus and ignite a third war with Russia. In this one, we step back to consider in greater depth the central place of ethnic Chechens in the leadership structure of *Dā'ish* and *Jabhat al-Nusra*,⁶ and on the other side of the conflict, al-Sham's Diaspora Chechens communities in Jordan and Turkey.

The group "Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham" [Arabic transl.: *ad-Dawlah l-'Islāmiyyah fil-'Irāq wash-Shām*] is sometimes referred to by its Arabic transliteration's acronym, *Dā'ish*. The author has elected to use *Dā'ish* to sidestep debate over use of the variants Islamic State, ISIS, and ISIL. Its claimed territory is shown in the inset map below.



After contextualizing key terms, we assess the connection between modern Chechnya and Jordan, with its substantial North Caucasian Diaspora communities. We then consider the Chechen diaspora of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, during which successive migration waves brought North Caucasian émigrés to al-Sham. We return to the North Caucasus to consider the development of Islam there, including the emergence of the Chechen Sufi brotherhoods, the forerunners to today's Chechen *jama'ats*,⁷ and the development of the jihad

³ The group Islamic State (and others) use the Arabic transliteration *al-Sham* as an historical place-name for Greater Syria. The recently declared caliphate of the same name claims all or substantially all of the territory of modern Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Israel, and smaller parts of Turkey and Saudi Arabia.

⁴ *Al-Muwahhidun* means "those who believe in the unity of God," the latter representing a fundamental Islamic doctrine called *tawhid*. It is common practice for Salafists to call themselves *Muwahhidun*. For an interesting discussion of the difference between *muwahhidun* and jihadis, see: Joanna Paraszczuk (2014). "Syria: ISIS Chechens- We're Not Jihadis, We're Muwahhideen." *From Chechnya to Syria* [online edition, 23 May 2014]. <http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=22065>. Last accessed 23 September 2014. The author recommends Ms. Paraszczuk's insightful essays and social media postings.

⁵ For clarity's sake, the term "Diaspora Chechens" is used to refer to ethnic Chechens who are the descendants of earlier émigrés from the North Caucasus region. The term "North Caucasian Chechens" is used to refer to ethnic Chechens who are denizens of that region, principally Chechnya, Ingushetia, and Georgia's Pankisi Gorge.

⁶ The full Arabic transliteration is *Jabhat an-Nuṣrah li-Ahli sh-Shām*, or "Front for the Victory of the People of Sham."

⁷ The Arabic *jama'at* is a common term denoting a group, a gathering, or an assembly. The *jama'at* is not a new social structure in the Caucasus, where it grafted onto tribal-based communal organizations that existed at the time of Islamization. That being said, an analogous Chechen colloquialism, *yurt* [Chechen: юрта], means something more along the lines of the village community and thus implies a kinship element not inherent in

variant called *ghazawayt*. Next, we look at the return of Jordanian Chechens to the fatherland to fight in the Chechen wars with Russia during the 1990s and 2000s, during which time a more fundamentally Middle Eastern embodiment of Islam emerged in Chechnya. After a brief aside distinguishing *Syria* the historical place-name from the modern national-state of the same name, we look at the movement of Chechen fighters into the region and their organization into highly disciplined, highly skilled units. This includes the putative “Chechen al-Qa’ida,” as well as conflict between different Chechen-dominated factions. We assess whether Chechen *jama'ats* might migrate back into Russia to restart the conflict there; or broaden the current conflict in al-Sham by crossing the border into Turkey, where the Dā‘ish caliphate also claims territory. Finally, we conclude by considering options to address the risk posed by Chechen *muwahhidun* of Dā‘ish, and Chechen jihadis of the al-Qa’ida aligned Jabhat al-Nusra, with particular attention to the place of Russia and Jordan in the conflict.

CONTEXTUALIZING TERMS: CHECHENS AND JIHAD

North Caucasus Chechen fighters have distinguished themselves on the battlefields of Syria and more recently, Iraq, evincing both a tenacious single mindedness and fighting prowess. Absent the characteristically fractious nature of Chechen *jama'ats*, these *muwahhidun* and jihadis would exert an even more outsized impact than the already considerable one they have had so far. Many of the fighters come with considerable experience, both in formal military units in Russia and Georgia, and in earlier irregular conflicts in Afghanistan and, of course, Chechnya and the North Caucasus. They are formidable foes, as Russian armed forces can attest from decades of fighting Chechen insurgents in the North Caucasus. The Russo-Chechen wars of the 1990s and 2000s recalled for many Russians (if they needed reminding) the century-old lesson of what it meant to be “the captive of the Caucasus”:

"You must be joking, Petrovich. I'm a prisoner? You're the prisoner here. He's a prisoner, you're a prisoner. Every one of your soldiers here is a prisoner! But I, on the other hand, I'm no prisoner."⁸

Something similar might be said of the West's position today in al-Sham.

The debasing image of Chechens that runs throughout the writing of Bestuzhev-Marlinskii, Lermontov, Tolstoi, and others is a subject in its own right. For our purposes here, however, suffice it to say that Chechens (along with Circassians and other North Caucasians, all of whom were treated as interchangeable) are caricatured as doubly noble savages, i.e., by blood

jama'at. Over time, Caucasian *jama'ats* took on a defensive military role and commonly merged into more powerful confederations in the face of a severe external threat. This is the context in which *jama'at* came into common use among Chechens during the 1990s, when militarized groups formed under the leadership of Sheikh Fathi, a Jordanian Chechen who arrived in Chechnya in 1995. Fathi's *jama'at* units were quickly recognized as the most powerful in the Chechen resistance. Use of the term *jama'at* by North Caucasian Chechens has carried over into their involvement in the al-Sham conflict. For a detailed treatment of the subject, see Mairbek Vatchagaev's insightful essay, "The Evolution of the Chechen Jamaat."

[http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=2859&no_cache=1]

⁸ Vladimir Semyonovich Makanin (1995; 1997). *Кавказский пленный* [*The Captive of the Caucasus*]. (Moscow: Panorama), p. 453.

and by temperament.⁹ The 19th century writer Mikhail Lermontov, who twice served with the Czarist army the Caucasus, used a particular imagery infused with a sense of inchoate, predatory violence:

*Do not sleep, Cossack, in the darkness of the night;
Chechens are moving beyond the river!*¹⁰

*The wicked Chechen crawls onto the shore
Sharpening his dagger.*¹¹

A contemporary (and rather more dispassionate) view is that “Russian invaders provoked the Chechens to violence and then concluded they were mere savages.”¹²

On the question of *jihad*, two stipulations are in order, the first being that the word has been drained of much color and meaning through careless misuse in the West. The second stipulation is that its use in the context of the al-Sham conflict is fundamentally idiosyncratic in three ways. The first is that *jihad* in the al-Sham conflict is delimited from nationalist conflict, as Abu Musab al-Zarqawi explained in a 2005 al-Qa’ida in Iraq video:

"Our Jihad in Iraq is the same as in Afghanistan, Kashmir, Chechnya, and Bosnia, an honorable jihad. [...] We shed the dust of divisive nationalism and hopeless patriotism that tears asunder the ranks of Muslims and turns them into tasty bites for the infidels."¹³

A more aphoristic expression is “we are a gathering of nations, a melting pot.”¹⁴

⁹ Harsha Ram (1999). *Prisoners of the Caucasus: Literary Myths and Media Representations of the Chechen Conflict*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California, Berkeley), p. 3. Ram writes, "The Noble Savage is perhaps the most significant allegorical figure in the mythology of the Caucasus...It could be argued that the literary myth of the Noble Savage has been positively appropriated by contemporary Chechens themselves." [pp. 7-8]

¹⁰ Mikhail Lermontov (1828). *Cherkesy*, lines 36-37. <http://feb-web.ru/feb/lermont/texts/lerm06/vol03/le3-007-.htm>. Last accessed 17 September 2014. The quoted lines read in the original Russian: «Не спи, казак, во тьме ночной; Чеченцы ходить за рекой!» Russian transl.: *Ne spi, kazak, vo t'me nochnoi; Chechentsy khodit' za rekoi!*

¹¹ Lermontov (1840). *Cossack Lullaby*, lines 11-12. <http://www.pushkins-poems.com/lerm01.htm>. Last accessed 17 September 2014. The quoted text reads in the original Russian: Злой чечен ползет на берег, Точить свой кинжал. Russian transl.: *Zloy chechen polzet na bereg, Tocht' svoi kinzhal*.

¹² Carlotta Gall & Thomas de Waal (1998). *Chechnya: Calamity in the Caucasus*. (New York: New York University Press), p. 30.

¹³ From a montage entitled “And Worship Shall be Only for Allah,” issued by Al Qaeda in Iraq's Media Division in June 2005. Quoted in Mohammed M. Hafez (2007). "Martyrdom Mythology in Iraq: How Jihadists Frame Suicide Terrorism in Videos and Biographies." *Terrorism and Political Violence*. 19:95, p. 100. <http://www1.international.ucla.edu/media/files/Martyrdom%20Mythology%20in%20Iraq.pdf>. Last accessed 14 October 2014. Al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian, led *Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad* which in October 2004 renamed itself as "Al-Qa'ida in Iraq," or formally, the "Organization of Jihad's Base in Mesopotamia" aka "TQJBR," the acronym of its Arabic transliteration [*Tanzim Qaidat al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Rafidayn*]. Al-Zarqawi was killed in a June 2006 airstrike in Iraq.

¹⁴ Quoted in *Mesopotamische Gesellschaft*. [11 October 2014]. <http://www.mesop.de/2014/10/11/what-are-the-chechen-jamaats-in-the-islamic-state-syria-kobane-by-joanna-paraszczuk/>. Last accessed 16 October 2014.

The second idiosyncrasy is that the new globalism aside, *jihad* in the context of the al-Sham conflict is strikingly un-modern, and in the view of at least one scholar, decidedly (but not pejoratively) medieval:

"Jihads...might, in the right hands, become 'privatized' conquests that could become the basis for regimes to rival that of the caliph. [...] Islamic law, including the concept of jihad, developed in a medieval, indeed imperial context in which warrior-elites dominated and in which warfare and the conquest of non-Muslim lands were common features. [...] In the Qur'an, the hadith, and the writing of jurists, jihad was a principle with many meanings, all of them linked to a core meaning of 'struggle,' often qualified as 'struggle on the path of God,' *fi sabil Allah*. [...] Nevertheless, it is also perfectly clear that when medieval Muslims discussed jihad, they were almost always discussing it in the sense of armed struggle against infidels. [...] Jihad is thus not militarism, to be contrasted with pacifism, but rather war with pious intent, to be contrasted with the vast taxonomies of war that are secular. [...] The exercise of jihad by some sufficient number of Muslims at any given time relieved other Muslims of the duty"¹⁵

Thus *jihad* in this context is both delimited from national constraints — witness the literal disregard of geopolitical borders in Syria and Iraq that so confounds some Western analysts — and abject warfare of a specific typology. To this, North Caucasus Chechens have brought a third idiosyncrasy — their singular concept of *ghazawayt*,¹⁶ combining notions of existential resistance to foreign invaders and traditional Islamic *jihad*.

A CHECHEN NEXUS IN AL-SHAM

Better a close neighbor than a distant relative.

-Traditional Chechen proverb¹⁷

In late June, Jordan's King Abdullah II arrived in the Chechen capital, Grozny, at the invitation of Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov,¹⁸ after which the two travelled to Tsentaroy to

¹⁵ Paul J. Cobb (2014). *The Race for Paradise: An Islamic History of the Crusades*. (New York: Oxford University Press), pp. 29-31.

¹⁶ *Ghazawayt* [Russian: Газават] is derived from the Arabic transliteration of the plural of *ghaziya* meaning an attack or a military offensive. The term as used today is specific to North Caucasian *jama'ats*, combining Chechen notions of clan resistance to foreign invaders and traditional Islamic ones of jihad.

¹⁷ Chechen: Генарчу йиш – вешел гергара лулахо тоьлу. Chechen transl.: *Genarchu yisch: veshel gergara lulakho to'lu*.

¹⁸ "Jordan's King Abdullah visits Chechnya." *Chechnya Today* [online English language edition, 20 June 2014]. <http://chechnyatoday.com/en/content/view/2798/308/>. Last accessed 15 September 2014. According to the official Jordanian account, "The meeting also dealt with the latest developments in the Middle East and issues of interest to the Islamic world. The King highlighted the role played by Jordan to promote peace, security and stability, serve Islamic causes and highlight the true essence of Islam, which calls for moderation and peace, as a basis for co-existence and interaction between different peoples." See: "King holds talks with Chechen President." *Jordan News Agency/PETRA* [online English language edition, 19 June 2014].

observe joint anti-terrorist exercises by Chechnya's Ministry of Internal Affairs and Russia's Ministry of Internal Affairs.¹⁹ As the Shi'a-orientated *Ahlul Bayt News Agency* put it, "it is quite unusual for a foreign head of state to meet with a Russian republic leader twice in six months — and for a foreign head of state to come to a regional capital for a meeting like that without also seeing Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow or elsewhere — they probably have something more substantial to discuss."²⁰ Three months earlier, Kadyrov, whose official title is Head of the Chechen Republic, visited Abdullah in Amman, the capital of Jordan.²¹

In March 2011, Abdullah held his first formal talks with Kadyrov in Jordan during which Abdullah "stressed Jordan's support for Chechens' preservation of their Islamic identity," regarding which he "noted that the opening of the first school for Chechen children in Zarqa is part of an effort to preserve Chechen cultural identity and language in Jordan;"²² an earlier example is the new Chechen mosque that opened in Zarka in June 2009.²³ When Kadyrov first visited Jordan and Saudi Arabia in August 2007 seeking financial support for "Chechen reconstruction," he also reportedly "sought the support of [Jordan's] considerable Chechen diaspora." While Kadyrov "did not represent the Government of Russia when going abroad, his travel is coordinated with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs." Russia's FSB, however, "feared his efforts would lead to increased Wahhabi and, possibly, extremist Islam in the Caucasus."²⁴

http://www.petra.gov.jo/Public_News/Nws_NewsDetails.aspx?lang=2&site_id=1&NewsID=155636&CatID=13. Last accessed 16 September 2014.

¹⁹ Known by its Russian transliteration's acronym, MVD [Russian: Министерство внутренних дел (МВД). Russian transl.: *Ministerstvo Vnutrennikh Del*], Russia's Internal Affairs Ministry controls a sizeable federal paramilitary force responsible for counter-terrorist operations within the Russian Federation. The Chechen Ministry of Internal Affairs controls a similar paramilitary force. In 2003, the MVD took responsibility for "counterterrorism operations" in Chechnya from Russia's Federal Security Service, better known by its Russian acronym FSB [Russian: Федеральная служба безопасности России йской Федерации (ФСБ). Russian transl.: *Federal'naya sluzhba bezopasnosti Rossiyskoy Federatsii* (FSB)]. In February 2006, President Putin established a "National Counterterrorism Committee" to coordinate the activities of Russian federal and regional authorities. [Robert W. Orttung & Andrei Stanislavovich Makarychev (2006). *National Counterterrorism Strategies: Legal, Institutional, and Public Policy Dimensions in the US, UK, France, Turkey and Russia*. (Washington DC: IOS Press)]

²⁰ "Chechen extremists threaten Jordan." *ABNA* [online English language edition, 28 June 2014].

<http://www.abna.ir/english/service/middle-east-west-asia/archive/2014/06/28/619525/story.html>. Last accessed 16 September 2014. ABNA by its own description is a "Shia news agency."

²¹ If one headline ["Russian puppet Kadyrov booed during meeting with Chechen youths in Jordan"] is to be believed, Kadyrov's reception by Jordan's ethnic Chechens was less than wholly enthusiastic. See: *Kavkaz Center* [online English language edition, 20 March 2011].

<http://www.kavkazcenter.com/eng/content/2011/03/20/13863.shtml>. Last accessed 16 September 2014.

²² "King receives Chechen president." Royal Hashemite Court (Jordan) News Release, Amman, 15 March 2011. http://www.kingabdullah.jo/index.php/en_US/news/view/id/9023/videoDisplay/1.html. Last accessed 20 September 2014.

²³ <http://www.waynakh.com/eng/2009/07/jordanian-chechens-opened-a-new-mosque/>. Last accessed 16 September 2014.

²⁴ United States State Department (2007). "Chechen President Reaches Out to the Middle East." Cable 07MOSCOW5734_a. CONFIDENTIAL. https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/07MOSCOW5734_a.html. Last accessed 20 September 2014.

In July 2012, an Adygea Republic governmental official claimed that a Jordanian member of parliament, Munir Sobrok, told Adygean officials that “King of Jordan Abdullah II is ready to help all Circassians leaving Syria because of the warfare – those who want to stay in Jordan and those who want to move here.”²⁵ Two years later, in June 2014, the semi-official English language newspaper, *The Jordan Times*, quoted Abdullah in Grozny saying, “Our brotherly Chechens in Jordan are an integral constituent of Jordanian society with endless contributions to the country’s development.”²⁶ Speculating that “King Abdullah’s unusual visit to the Chechen Republic is a sign of the threat Chechen militants pose to Jordan and the region,” one commentator wrote in *Al-Monitor*:

“With ISIL now consolidating its position in western Iraq and seeking control over the Syria-Iraq border, Abdullah and his government are concerned about their country’s northern and eastern borders, and the extent to which Chechens already in Jordan might make common cause with ISIL militants outside it. Kadyrov could be a key ally for Jordan in understanding and managing this challenge.”²⁷

Kadyrov is nothing if not controversial:²⁸ calling him the “brutal and corrupt Chechen leader,” United States Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Thomas Melia accused Kadyrov of “creating an atmosphere of fear and intimidation for human rights groups, the media, religious communities, and anyone else who might raise an independent voice.”²⁹ Case in point, while Kadyrov forcefully denied sending Chechen forces into Crimea, he was awarded a medal “for the liberation of Crimea”³⁰ by Crimean leader Sergey Aksyonov.³¹ Nevertheless:

“Given Chechnya’s clan-driven politics and society, Kadyrov is in a much better position to offer information, advice and leverage. [He] may well have very

²⁵ “King of Jordan is ready to help Syrian Circassians in repatriation, public figures of Adygea assert.” *Caucasian Knot* [online English language edition, 14 July 2012]. <http://eng.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/21588/>. Last accessed 14 October 2014.

²⁶ “King visits Chechnya, reviews ties with Kadyrov.” *The Jordan Times* [online English language edition, 19 June 2014]. <http://m.jordantimes.com/king-visits-chechnya-reviews-ties-with-kadyrov>. Last accessed 23 September 2014.

²⁷ Paul J. Saunders (2014). “Chechen extremists threaten Jordan.” *Al-Monitor* [online English language edition, 23 June 2014]. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/06/jordan-abdullah-ii-chechnya-extremist-jihadists-threatening.html>. Last accessed 23 September 2014. This story also appeared on Iran’s *Al-Alam* news website [<http://en.alalam.ir/news/1606190>]. Paul Saunders is a former United States State Department senior adviser.

²⁸ This is so even among Jordanian Chechens: After ITAR-TASS reported in August 2006 that “the council of the Chechen diaspora in the Kingdom of Jordan” had invited Kadyrov to visit Jordan, the report was immediately disputed by Mohammad Shishani, the Secretary General of the Chechen Elders Council in Jordan.

²⁹ “Testimony of Thomas O. Melia, Deputy Assistant Secretary, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor.” Statement Before the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 14 December 2011.” <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/rm/2011/178843.htm>. Last accessed 16 September 2014.

³⁰ Russian: За освобождение Крыма. Russian transl.: *Za osvobozhdeniye Kryma*.

³¹ Aksyonov became Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Crimea subsequent Crimea’s March 2014 annexation by Russia. See: “Р. Кадыров награжден медалью ‘За освобождение Крыма’.” *Чечня Сегодня* [online Russian language edition, 9 June 2014]. <http://chechnyatoday.com/content/view/279250>. Last accessed 16 September 2014. On 25 July 2014, the European Union placed Kadyrov’s name on its roster of individuals against whom sanctions were imposed.

useful channels into Jordan's Chechen diaspora, too. Over the medium and longer term, Abdullah might not be the only foreign leader to find Kadyrov a potentially valuable interlocutor. From Kadyrov's (and Putin's) perspective, of course, it is far better to have these militant extremists outside Chechnya and Russia than in them — they are extremely dangerous.”³²

The instrumental value of intelligence about North Caucasus Chechen militants is not lost on Russia. According to the English-language electronic newspaper, *Moscow Times*, among the ways Russia might retaliate against Western sanctions is to “withhold intelligence on [Islamic] terrorism threats.”³³

Russia several years earlier deployed Chechen military units into al-Sham. In October 2006, two platoons from the *Vostok* (East) and *Zapad* (West) battalions of the Army's Main Intelligence Directorate³⁴ were sent from bases in Chechnya to serve as security for a Russian bridge-building battalion stationed in Lebanon's Saida region. At the time, President Putin commented that it is easier for ethnic Chechen forces “to establish contacts with the local population,”³⁵ in an area once ruled by Circassian Mamlukes. The Russian newspaper *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* later analogized Russia's anti-terrorist operations in the North Caucasus to Israeli ones in southern Lebanon.³⁶

³² Paul J. Saunders (2014). "Chechen extremists threaten Jordan." *AL-Monitor* [online English language edition, 24 June 2014]. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/06/jordan-abdullah-ii-chechnya-extremist-jihadists-threatening.html>. Last accessed 15 September 2014.

³³ See: "14 Ways Russia Can Retaliate Against Western Sanctions." *The Moscow Times* [online English language edition, 16 September 2014]. <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/article/14-ways-russia-can-retaliate-to-western-sanctions/507261.html>. Last accessed 21 September 2014.

³⁴ The Main Intelligence Directorate [Russian: Главное разведывательное управление ("ГРУ"). Russian transl.: *Glavnoye razvedyvatel'noye upravleniye* ("GRU")] is the Army's foreign military intelligence main directorate. The GRU in late 1999 organized two ethnic Chechen special battalions: "East" or *Vostok* [Russian: Специальные батальоны "Восток"], the core of which was recruited from Icherian national guard forces that fought against Russia in the First Chechen War (1994-1996); and "West" or *Zapad* [Russian: Специальные батальоны "Запад"] comprised of ethnic Chechens from northwestern Chechnya deemed loyal to Russia (and in contrast to *Vostok*, excluding amnestied former resistance members). Russia deployed the *Vostok* and *Zapad* battalions to Lebanon as part of the Russian Army's 42nd Motor Rifle Division, but they operated under the GRU's direct control. The battalions were later deployed to Georgia in 2008 where they conducted operations in both Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

³⁵ Quoted in Andrew McGregor (2006). "Chechen Troops Accompany Russian Soldiers in Lebanon." *North Caucasus Analysis*. 7:41.

http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=32178&no_cache=1#.VB8IPUu4n8s. Last accessed 21 September 2014. At the time, the deployment was considered "a minor propaganda success through an international display of Chechen loyalty to the Putin regime."

³⁶ "Северокавказские параллели Южного Ливана." *Независимая газета* [online Russian language edition, 26 December 2012]. <http://www.ng.ru/forum/messages/forum3/topic179/message228/#message228>. Last accessed 22 September 2014.

CHECHEN DIASPORAS OF THE 19TH & EARLY 20TH CENTURIES

Chechens call their homeland *Daimokhk*³⁷ (“the fatherland”) or *Nokhchichoe*³⁸ (“the Chechen home”). Diaspora Chechens in Jordan have substantially preserved a sense of ethnic identity with *Daimokhk* and resisted assimilation: more than a century after leaving the North Caucasus, fully half of Jordan's Shishan consider themselves “people of Caucasian origin and mentality, and citizens of Jordan,” and fewer than one in ten consider themselves “Jordanians only.”³⁹ A 2000 study found that virtually all (96 percent) Jordanian Shishan are proficient in conversational Chechen — “The general rule is speak Chechen to Chechens whenever possible” — though only one in five were proficient in reading or writing Chechen.⁴⁰ Over half (57.4 percent) knew the name and location of their ancestral village.⁴¹ Somewhat paradoxically, Chechen self-identification has served to ground Jordanian Shishan in a society where, as Seteny Shami writes, tribal tradition “is still the predominant political idiom.”⁴²

How did Chechens and other North Caucasians come to al-Sham? By the start of the 19th century, Russia had defeated the Crimean Khanate⁴³ on the Black and the Azov Seas littoral, and conquered Georgia on the southern side of the Caucasus Mountains. This left the North Caucasus in a geostrategically vulnerable position, sandwiched between an expansionist Russia to the north and its new acquisition, Georgia, to the south, to which Russia was connected precariously by only a narrow strip of Ossetian territory.

Russia's defeat of Persia in 1813 closed the ring around the North Caucasus. Two pockets of resistance remained: a Circassian one to the west toward the Black Sea; and a Chechen and Daghestani one to the east toward the Caspian Sea and Persia. Russia's subsequent annexation of Azerbaijan further isolated the Muslim Chechens and Daghestanis; and likewise, Muslim Circassians after Russia in 1810 annexed the Imeretian kingdom, which covered much of western Georgia. At this point, as one historian put it, Russian conquest of the North

³⁷ Chechen: Даймохк.

³⁸ Chechen: Нохчичое.

³⁹ Anastasia Ganich, a research associate in the Caucasus and Central Asia Training and Coordinating Center at Moscow State University's Institute of Asia and Africa, conducted extensive field research in Jordan during in 2001 and 2002 regarding “self-identification, ideas about historical homeland, and the impact on North Caucasian developments.” See: Ganich (2003). “Circassian diaspora in Jordan (self-identification, ideas about historical homeland and impact on North Caucasian developments).” *Central Asia and the Caucasus*. 1:19, pp. 23-31. http://www.ca-c.org/journal/2003/journal_eng/cac-01/03.ganeng.shtml. Last accessed 2 October 2014.

⁴⁰ Bader S. Dweik (2000). “Linguistic and Cultural Maintenance Among the Chechens of Jordan.” *Language, Culture and Curriculum*. 13:2, pp. 189-190. The use of oral Chechen by Jordanian Chechens is important for social cohesion: “In addition to a high rating for its role as a marker of the Chechen identity, the majority of respondents mentioned how useful it is to be able to speak Chechen when they do not want others to understand.” [Dweik, p. 192]

⁴¹ Ganich (2003), *op cit*.

⁴² Seteny Shami (1998). “Circassian Encounters: The Self as Other and the Production of the Homeland in the North Caucasus.” *Development and Change*. 29, p. 625. <http://www.aheku.net/datas/users/1-circassianencounters-byseteneyshami.pdf>. Last accessed 7 October 2014.

⁴³ Until Russia defeated the Crimean Khanate in 1801, the Black Sea was a figurative “Turkish lake”: Russia had neither an exit to the Black Sea nor the ability to block sea-routes that the Ottomans used to supply their Circassian allies.

Caucasus became “a question only of when and how.”⁴⁴ For Circassians, “the answer to ‘how?’ became a genocide in which Circassia as it had been known for the previous centuries simply ceased to exist.”⁴⁵ To the east, the Murudist⁴⁶ Iman Shamil led Chechen and Daghestani resistance until his defeat by Russia in 1859, after which many Chechens and Daghestanis fled west to the protection of the Ottoman Empire.

Today's North Caucasus diaspora communities in Jordan, Syria, Iraq, and Turkey are the product of successive migrations from the North Caucasus. Jordan's ethnic Circassians, who refer to themselves as *Adyghe* and whom Jordanians call by the Arabic transliteration *Sharakisah*, comprise a Sunnī Muslim community of some 25,000 people descended from families that arrived from the North Caucasus in the 1880s. The Ottomans encouraged them to settle in northern Jordan in an effort to establish a loyal element there to counterbalance the indigenous Bedouins.

The first wave of Diaspora Chechens came in 1865, when some 50,000 Chechens migrated to Turkey and to Syria's Golan Heights. This was followed by another wave in 1877 and a third one in 1901, when a smaller number ($\cong 3000$) of Chechens arrived in Transjordan,⁴⁷ whom the indigenous Arabs called Shishan. By 1907, Shishan had taken up land around the spring at Zerka (later made famous by the Arab Kegio), and at Swaileh and Shuneh on the road connecting Amman and the Jordan River.

To put these numbers into context, Jordan's population in 1922⁴⁸ “consist[ed] of a settled population of 122,430 (54% of total) and a nomadic population of 102,950 (46%).”⁴⁹ This meant Diaspora Circassians and Chechens together accounted for about one-tenth of Transjordan's population, and importantly, for about one-fifth of its non-nomadic population.

⁴⁴

-1960." *International Relations*

Quarterly, 2:6, p. 8. Historic memory of the cause of the Circassian diaspora

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* Circassian clans that survived Russia's genocidal ethnic cleansing campaign (1860-1864) mostly resettled to the Ottoman Empire. One legacy of this migration is today's Abkhazian-Georgian conflict. While the historical fact of it is clear, the historic memory may be less so as it conflates with contemporary events. Cf.: "These Chechens have really proved they are crazy. It is their fault that we are all in this country at all. In the nineteenth century they also did not know when to give up and just live with the Russians. They kept fighting until they got us all kicked out of the Caucasus." Unattributed quote in Seteny Shami (2000). "The little nation: Minorities and majorities in the context of shifting geographies." *Nationalism and Internationalism in the Post-Cold War Era*. Kjell Goldmann, Ulf Hannerz & Charles Westin, eds. (London: Routledge), p. 111

⁴⁶ *Muridism*, from the Sufi term *murid* is "the system of organization of the Sufi brotherhoods, and the subordinate relationship between pupil (*murid*) and master (*murshid*). Uwe Halbach (1994). "Holy War against Czarism: The links between Sufism and Jihad in the nineteenth-century anticolonial resistance against Russia." *Muslim Communities Reemerge*. Andreas Kappeler, et al., eds. (Durham: Duke University Press). The movement grew out of the Dervish *Naksibendi* brotherhood and combined Sufism with *ghazawayt*.

⁴⁷ Transjordan at the time was an unofficial part of Ottoman Syria. It was established as a British-supported administrative entity in 1921 and as a British League of Nations' Mandate in 1923 in the aftermath of World War I. It originated as Transjordan, an artificial state with long straight borders and few natural frontiers except the Jordan River, which was used as the boundary with the Palestinian mandate.⁶ Transjordan was created out of the "unallocated" parts of the Palestinian mandate east of Jordan River in former Ottoman territory.

⁴⁸ These numbers are taken from the October 1922 census conducted by the British Mandate of Palestine.

⁴⁹ Uriel Dann (1984). *Studies in the History of Transjordan, 1920-1949: The Making of a State*. (Boulder: Westview Press), p. 4.

The Jordanian dialect of Chechen is usually referred to as *Zerq' Chechen*, a name derived from the original Chechen settlement on the banks of Jordan's Zarqa River northeast of Amman (which was resettled by Diaspora Circassians). The Shishan were part of a group of several thousand Chechens belonging to the *Nakşibendi tariqat* (to which most Jordanian Chechens still nominally ascribe today) who left the North Caucasus in 1899. The original Shishan settlement was located south of an existing Druze village; hence, the former became known as *Azraq Shishan* to distinguish it from existing Druze village, *Azraq Druze*. The Shishan established additional settlements in Suwaylih, Ar-Rusaifa, Zerqa, and El Sukhne.

By all estimates, modern Jordan's approximately 9,000⁵⁰ Shishan have fully assimilated into Jordanian society, and are especially influential in Jordan's General Intelligence Directorate and armed (especially special operations) forces, and the Jordanian royal court.⁵¹ Two decades ago, a Russian commentator noted, "the personal security service of the King of Jordan consists practically solely of Chechens,"⁵² something demonstrative of Shishan loyalty to the Hashemite royal family. Ethnic Circassians and Chechens are reserved a quota of three seats in the 150-seat Lower House of Parliament, two in Amman (the 5th and 6th districts, respectively) and one in Zarqa (1st district).⁵³ In September 2011, King Abdullah announced "financial support to a number of Chechen societies, clubs and institutions across the Kingdom," during a meeting with Chechen community leaders.⁵⁴

There are diaspora communities as well in Syria, Iraq, and Turkey. Syrian Chechens (the estimated number of which varies widely, from 6,000 to 35,000) were concentrated (pre-1967) in the Golan Heights; in northeastern Syria around Qamishli near the Turkish and Iraqi borders; and in Deir al-Zur on the Euphrates River. Iraqi Diaspora Chechens are mostly descendants of a Chechen brigade that accompanied Ahmed Şefik Midhat Pasha from Turkey and Syria in the late 1860s to settle in Ba'quba, northeast of Baghdad, and Hamidiyya in Kirkuk's Haweeja District.⁵⁵ Turkey has the region's largest population of Diaspora Circassians, most of whom follow Sunnī Hanafi *madhhab*: what Turkey refers to as

⁵⁰ This figure is a 1977 estimate by al-Bashayer: as Dweik [*op cit.*, p. 188] writes, it is very important to note that in the absence of any official census, it is very hard to estimate their population.

⁵¹ Matthew Hedges (2013). "Strategic Balancing and Power Play in the North Caucasus- International Implications of the Rise of Chechnya Under Kadyrov." *Institute for Near Eastern & Gulf Military Analysis Special Report No. 19*, p. 8. <http://www.inegma.com/Admin/Content/File-91020136519.pdf>. Last accessed 22 September 2014.

⁵² Виктор Перушкин (1994). "Чеченцы в Москве. Мы не хотим мстить." *Аргументы и Факты*. 51:21 (21 December 1994).

⁵³ In 2003, Circassians were divested of their historical seat in Amman's Third Electoral District (including downtown Amman, the core of the original Circassian town) by then Prime Minister Ali Abu Al-Ragheb, who sought to disenfranchise a Circassian anticorruption activist named Toujan Faisal.

⁵⁴ "King voices pride in Chechen community." Royal Hashemite Court (Jordan) New Release, Amman, 5 September 2011. http://www.kingabdullah.jo/index.php/en_US/news/view/id/9479/videoDisplay/1.html. Last accessed 20 September 2014.

⁵⁵ Amjad Jaimoukha (2005). *The Chechens: A handbook*. (New York: Routledge), p. 239.

“Circassians” bundles together all North Caucasian émigrés,⁵⁶ estimated at 400,000 people.⁵⁷ More recently, some three to four thousand Chechens came to Turkey from Chechnya during 1999-2001⁵⁸

ISLAM IN THE NORTH CAUCASUS & CHECHEN SUFI BROTHERHOODS

Returning for the moment to Chechnya, traditional Islam arrived there late, and when it did:

"It mixed with traditional religious beliefs and practices, which may help explain why the brand of Islam adopted by the Chechens for the most part was Sufism. [...] Sufism was particularly amenable to the Chechen's traditional highlander culture, with its village-based individualism, egalitarianism, traditional practices, respect for elders, and opposition to hierarchy."⁵⁹

There has been considerable debate among scholars about whether Shishan were Sunnī or Shi'a Muslims. The author of a 1989 Library of Congress country study wrote “the Shishan...were Shia Muslims, the only representatives of this branch of Islam in Jordan.”⁶⁰ Likewise, respected cultural anthropologist Raphael Patai wrote some years earlier, “While the Circassians are Sunni Muslims, (mostly of the Hanafi schools), the Chechens are Shi'ite Muslims.”⁶¹ The opposite view is that “Both Patai and Hourani describe the Chechens as being Shiite Muslims in contrast to the Sunni Adigah. If the Chechens were ever Shiite Muslims, they certainly are not now.”⁶²

⁵⁶ Orkhan Gafarli (2014). "The Role of North Caucasus Diaspora Groups in Turkey-Russia Relations." *Turkish Policy Quarterly*. 13:1, p. 174. http://www.turkishpolicy.com/dosyalar/files/vol_13-no_1-gafarli.pdf. Last accessed 16 October 2014.

⁵⁷ This estimate is from Ali Tayyar Onder (2007). *Ethnic Structure of Turkey*. (Ankara: Fark Press), p. 293. The expulsion of Chechens to Turkey during the 1860s and 1870s is vividly described in the contemporary novels of the late Chechen writer, Abuzar Aidamirov.

⁵⁸ Marc Brody (2008). "The Chechen Diaspora in Turkey." *North Caucasus Analysis*. 6:7. http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=2169#.VCA5kUu4n8s. Last accessed 22 September 2014.

⁵⁹ Edward W. Walker (1998). "Islam in Chechnya," p. 2. <http://www.islamicpopulation.com/pdf/Islam%20in%20Chechnya.pdf>. Last accessed 6 October 2014.

⁶⁰ Helen Chapin Metz, ed. (1989). *Jordan: A Country Study*. (Washington, D.C.: General Printing Office). The United States Library of Congress *Country Studies Series* described itself as follows: "The Country Studies Series presents a description and analysis of the historical setting and the social, economic, political, and national security systems and institutions of countries throughout the world. The series examines the interrelationships of those systems and the ways they are shaped by cultural factors. The books represent the analysis of the authors and should not be construed as an expression of an official United States Government position, policy, or decision. The authors have sought to adhere to accepted standards of scholarly objectivity." [<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/about.html>]

⁶¹ Raphael Patai, ed. (1956). *The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan*. (New Haven, CT: Human Relations Area Files Inc.), p. 82.

⁶² George H. Weightman (1970). "Circassians." *Readings in Arab Middle Eastern Societies and Cultures*. Abdulla M. Lutfiyya & Charles W. Churchill, eds. (The Hague: Mouton & Co. M.V.), p. 92. Weightman was an associate professor at the American University in Beirut at the time he wrote the article.

To correct the record right after the many misstatements on the subject, Diaspora Chechens who came to Transjordan belonged to a larger population of Shafi'i⁶³ Sunnī Muslims whose views were influenced heavily by the *an-Naqshbandiyyah* Sufi movement. Dzeranov⁶⁴ offers a properly nuanced characterization of the variants of Islamic practice in the North Caucasus:

“Diverse religion forms were typically practiced in the Northern Caucasus. The region is one of the most multicultural and religiously diverse parts of Russia. Islam was the dominant religion in the Caucasus at the time of its incorporation into the Czarist Empire. The North Caucasus can be segmented three ways based on the dominant branch of Islam practiced in a given region, its influence there, and the time period in which it was adopted. Most inhabitants of the North Caucasus are Sunnis, with two exceptions. The first exception is Shi'a pockets inhabited by ethnic Azerbaijanis and Daghestanis. The second exception is parts of modern Chechnya and Ingushetia, in which Sufism first appeared in the mid-19th century CE.”⁶⁵

Sufi Islam adapted readily to the preexisting Vainakh social structure as reflected, for example, in the formation of Sufi *murids* or brotherhoods around local *shaykhs*.⁶⁶ Chechen resistance to Czarist imperialism was built on a system of organization inherent to the Sufi brotherhoods — the essence of which was the relationship between the *shaykh* or *murshid* and his *murids* — combined with indigenous clan and social structures, and a *Shari'a* duty to resist foreign rule by non-believers.

A quite different expression of Islam emerged during Chechnya's Islamic revival of the 1990s, when Wahhabism⁶⁷ became the dominant catchword (at least in Russian descriptions). As one scholar wrote, that term is:

“[U]sed indiscriminately to describe modernist, fundamentalist, puritanical Islamic movements that reject the authority of the traditional religious structures. With very few exceptions these new Wahhabis do not have the slightest knowledge of Muhammad Abd Ibn al-Wahhab's doctrine and the movements that it inspired, such as the *Ikhwan al-muslimin* (Muslim Brothers) and the Wahhabi movement in India. However, without expounding on the

⁶³ *Shafi'i* madh'hab is one of the four schools of *fiqh* or religious law within Sunnī Islam. It was named after Muhammad ibn Idris al-Shafi'i *aka* Imam Shafi'i (767CE-819CE; 150H-198H), who came to Egypt in the 9th century CE and taught that the paramount sources of legal authority are the Qur'an and the Sunnah, respectively.

⁶⁴ Dzeranov is a scholar at the North Ossetian Institute of Humanitarian and Social Studies, which is part of the Institute of Socio-Political Research of the Russian Academy of Sciences. See: Dzeranov (2014).

"Этноконфессиональные Различия Населения Северного Кавказа." *Фундаментальные Исследования*. 3:2014, pp. 861-865. <http://www.rae.ru/fs/pdf/2014/3-4/33771.pdf>. Last accessed 7 October 2014.

⁶⁵ Sebastian Smith (1998). *Allah's Mountains: Politics and War in the Russian Caucasus* (London: I.B. Tauris), p. 75.

⁶⁶ The author has elected to use the spelling of the Arabic transliteration *shaykh* rather than *sheik*, the more commonly seen spelling. *Shaykh* has specific meaning in the context of Sufism to denote someone granted *idhn* to lead followers, synonymous with *murshid*.

⁶⁷ Wahhabi is an English term derived from *Wahhābiyyah*.

finer points of Islamic doctrine, one can say that the political and social profile of some Wahhabis in Chechnya is similar to that of Islamic fundamentalists in other parts of the Muslim world.”⁶⁸ [sic]

The lineage of Chechen Wahhabism goes back further, tracing to Sufi participation in Shamil's 19th century *ghazawayt*⁶⁹ against Czarist imperial expansion into the North Caucasus and its effect on the evolution of Sufism there.⁷⁰ Baddeley wrote near the end of the 19th century Chechen Diaspora:

“The Russians...assign religious fanaticism as the primary cause of this and all similar outbreaks; but in truth it is only secondary. It was in the role of invaders, oppressors, conquerors — or, to use the current euphemism, *civilizers* — that they excited such bitter resentment. [...] The *Ghazavat* [sic] would never have been preached in the Caucasus had the Russians been peaceful and friendly neighbours.”⁷¹

Two Sufi *tariqah* were dominant in Chechnya, *an-Naqshbandiyyah* and *Qadiriya*,⁷² both of which were comprised of multiple brotherhoods or *wirds*⁷³ called by the name of their founding shaykh. Their emergence coincided with rise of Chechen resistance to attempts to impose Czarist authority, a coincidence that scholars believe underpins Chechen Sufi brotherhoods' enduringly politicized nature.

The internationalization of the North Caucasus conflict toward the end of the First World War had several effects, one of which was to make the territory largely uncontrollable.⁷⁴

⁶⁸ Marie Bennigsen (1999). "Chechnya: political developments and strategic implications for the North Caucasus." *Central Asian Survey*. 18:4, p. 548.

⁶⁹ The concept of *ghazawayt* (and its distinction from jihad) is understood by Russians: Tolstoi used the word as a working title of his novel set in 1904 Chechnya, published as *Hadji Murat* [Russian: Хаджи-Мурат. Russian transl.: *Khadzhi-Murat*].

⁷⁰ Galina M. Yemelianova (2001). "Sufism and Politics in the North Caucasus." *Nationalities Papers*. 29:4, p. 661.

⁷¹ John F. Baddeley (1908; 1998). *The Russian Conquest of the Caucasus*. (London: Longmans; Richmond, UK: Curzon Press), p. 147.

https://archive.org/stream/russianconquest00baddgoog/russianconquest00baddgoog_djvu.txt [1908 edition].

⁷² *Tariqah* is an Arabic transliteration that literally means "the Way" and is part of *Sharia* or "Revealed law". As commonly used today, *tariqah* means a Sufi school or order such as the *an-Naqshbandiyyah* or *Qadiriya*. The *an-Naqshbandiyyah* was founded by an 18th century Chechen, Shaykh Mansur Ushurma, who dealt Czarist forces a crushing defeat at the Sunzha River before his capture and death in a Russian prison in 1793. His successors led an armed revolt in Chechnya from 1824 until 1859. The *Qadiriya* originated in 12th century Baghdad and first appeared in the Caucasus in 1861. Together with a rejuvenated *an-Naqshbandiyyah*, the *Qadiriya* revolted against Czarist Russia in 1865, 1877, 1879 and the 1890s, and continued to plague Czarist efforts to impose order in the Caucasus until the Bolshevik Revolution.

⁷³ As used in the North Caucasus, a *wird* is a branch of a *tariqah*.

⁷⁴ Though outside the scope of this essay, this is a fascinating and little-studied episode of the First World War with implications for today's conflict in the Levant and the broader region. Following the disintegration of the North Caucasian Mountaineer Republic in May 1919, the leading political figures were divided into four distinct groupings: (1) a group of former Tsarist generals who decided to collaborate with Denikin; (2) Islamists; (3) Bolsheviks; and (4) and nationalists, most of whom were forced to leave the North Caucasus. Of the three groups that remained in the North Caucasus, the most powerful were the Islamic groups led by, respectively, Shayk Uzun

Among those who tried to step into the vacuum was a Daghestani shaykh, Uzun Haji, who led a revolt by the an-Naqshbandiyyah and Qadiriya *tariqahs*. His first opponent was the anti-Bolshevik White Army commanded by General Anton Deniken, for whom conquering the North Caucasus was critical to securing the flow of British supplies from the south.

Haji defeated Deniken's army at Derbent⁷⁵ and established a short-lived (September 1919-March 1920) emirate state modeled on one established by the Naqshbandi shaykh, Shamil, who became the third Imam in September 1834. However, Uzun Haji's emirate state came to an abrupt end⁷⁶ when the White Army abandoned the North Caucasus. He lost the support of the Bolsheviks, which had given it only to draw White troops in large numbers from the main front; of Turkey, which had retained ambitions of subordinating the entire Caucasus; and of Georgia, which supported him only to promote establishment of a buffer state with Russia. When Uzun Haji died in March 1920, Gotsinskiy took over and developed the military might into the strongest of the four factions.

Once Deniken was forced from the Caucasus in February 1920, the Bolsheviks moved quickly to liquidate the "North Caucasian Defense Council" formed earlier as a unified military front against the White Army. It was dissolved by the vote of Bolshevik members and turned into the Provisional Revolutionary Committee for the Caucasus, and the Council's non-Bolshevik members were dismissed and executed. The Bolsheviks then established the "Mountain Autonomous Republic" which incorporated Chechnya along with Ingushia, Ossetia, Kabardia and Karachai. While pockets of active Chechen resistance continued for some time, by 1925 Soviet power was well entrenched in the North Caucasus. Thereafter, all Sufi brotherhoods were affected by Soviet suppression of political and religious activities: during the Second World War, Stalin deported over a million Caucasians, including nearly the entire Chechen and Ingush populations.

The Sufi brotherhoods nevertheless remained the only Chechen social structure capable of preserving Islamic values and uniting Muslims. They survived the demise of the founding sheiks by allowing family ties, rather than Sufi erudition, to determine succession, and resisted integration longer than any other Russian region. Even after the last *ghazawayt* was defeated in the early 1920s, the *murid* facet of North Caucasian Islam was driven underground but never wholly eliminated. Given that Sufism did not have a long history in Chechnya, the new leaders often knew little theology but understood the Chechen tradition of resistance to Russian authority. Over time, the Naqshbandi Brotherhood survived rule by decentralizing and choosing its leaders by consensus (not hereditary succession) to ensure the continued

Haji and Najmuddin Gotsinskiy *aka* Shayk Najmuddin of Hotso (whom the Russians suspected of provoking uprisings in 1905 and 1913 on behalf of the Ottomans).

⁷⁵ Derbent was an historic Muslim Caucasian stronghold and long considered "the gate to the North Caucasus." [Mitat Celikpala (2002). "Search For a Common North Caucasian Identity: The Mountaineers' Attempts for Survival and Unity in Response to the Russian Rule," p. 96. <http://www.thesis.bilkent.edu.tr/0002016.pdf>. Last accessed 6 October 2014]

⁷⁶ Much like the similarly short-lived (May 1918-May 1919) "Federal Republic of the Mountaineers of North Caucasia and Daghestan."

existence of the *wird*. The Qadiris, on the other hand, maintained a hierarchal system that exposed their leaders to targeting by Soviet police.⁷⁷

As early as the 1970s, Islamic revivalist movements began to appear, and by the late 1980s there were more than 200 *murids* across some seven orders. The *Jamaat-ul-Muslimi* movement under Khasbulat Khasbulatov — whom Russian authorities called the leader “of a Wahhabi jamaat”⁷⁸ — was organized in 1989 in opposition to “official administrative Islam.” It was especially active in religious agitation starting 1991 as a result of the increase in the cost of the pilgrimage to Mecca.

In the 1990s, Chechens were the first to exit the Soviet-era “North Caucasian Religious Board” and establish their own *muftiyat*.⁷⁹ This precipitated to a struggle among the Sufi brotherhoods as each sought to elect a *mufti* from its own ranks, something that occurred at the same time Chechen nationalists were declaring independence from the Russian Federation. While the brotherhoods quickly made common cause with the more secular nationalists, the Russian government grasped the necessity of having allies among the brotherhoods. It used these alliances to foment a split among the brotherhoods at the start of the Second Chechen War (1999).

"THE FATHERLAND IS HEAVEN; A FOREIGN LAND IS HELL." ⁸⁰

"A man who enters Chechnya is lost,
but one who gets back out is like a man reborn."
-Fathi Muhammad Habib

Diaspora Chechens seeking return to the fatherland found the pathway blocked: in the 1870s, the Czarist government instructed its consul in Constantinople “to refuse outright to register the passports of those people from the Caucasus who became Turkish subjects and who want to come back home.”⁸¹ This practice remained practically unchanged well into the *perestroika* era: Mikhail Gorbachev rejected a 1989 petition from Syrian Circassians “to grant a right of repatriation and Soviet citizenship to 234 families.”

A Chechen, however, even when estranged in a foreign land:

“[W]ould sacrifice his life on the altar of the fatherland, and would die
upholding his principles and convictions. Heroic selflessness, or sheer

⁷⁷ "Islam, Jamaats and Implications for the North Caucasus." *Terrorism Monitor*. 4:11 (June 2006). http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=789#.VDKyr64mX0. Last accessed 6 October 2014.

⁷⁸ Galina Yemelianova (2010). *Radical Islam in the Former Soviet Union*. (Abingdon, UK: Routledge), p. 99.

⁷⁹ *Muftiyat* is a Russian transliteration [Russian: Муфтият] that means an administrative territorial unit under the authority of a *mufti* or legal scholar.

⁸⁰ Traditional Chechen proverb. Chechen: ГӀмохк – ялсамане, нехан мохк – жӀӀжахате. Chechen transl.: *Daymoxk – yalsamane, nexan moxk – zhözhaxate*. In Amjad Jaimoukha (2005). *The Chechens: a handbook*. (New York: Routledge), p. 257.

⁸¹ Ganich (2003), *op cit*.

foolhardiness, depending on your perspective, is firmly etched on the Chechen psyche. Upholding one's duty and honor with respect to one's family and clan had always been one of the highest priorities of a Chechen."⁸²

For some Diaspora Chechens, *duty* in the post-Soviet era meant returning to the fatherland. The conflicts in Abkhazia and Nagorno-Karabakh first drew Chechen veterans of the Afghan resistance to the Caucasus in the early 1990s,⁸³ about the same time the self-proclaimed Chechen Republic of Ichkeria declared independence from the Russian Federation. It was during this period that a more fundamentally Middle Eastern embodiment of Islam emerged in Chechnya. Among those who "returned" to the North Caucasus were Shamsuddin Allaudin Yusef and Shamil Beno, both Jordanian-born Chechens who later held positions in the Ichkerian government.⁸⁴

At first, the activities of the National Congress of the Chechen People (NCCP) went unnoticed by Moscow despite the NCCP's adoption of an openly separatist resolution in 1990. In June 1991, it declared that the "Chechen Republic" (carved out of the Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic) would secede from the Soviet Union and the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic, respectively. Its executive council claimed to have the support of Jordan and the Georgian SSR⁸⁵ as well as ethnic Chechens living in neighboring Ingushetia.⁸⁶

During this period a Jordanian Chechen, Fathi Mohamed Habib⁸⁷ *aka* Shaykh Ali Fathi al-Shishani, established a footprint in Chechnya for *Gama'a al-Islamiyya*.⁸⁸ The first leader of the

⁸² Jaimoukha (2005), p. 95.

⁸³ Yavus Akhmadov, Stephen R. Bowers, & Marion T. Doss Jr. (2001). "Islam in the North Caucasus." *The Journal of Social, Political, and Economic Studies*. 26:3, p. 577.

⁸⁴ See: Markedonov (2008), *op cit.*, fn(93).

⁸⁵ Chechen ethno-political and territorial conflicts became interconnected with similar conflicts in other recently-independent Caucasian states, particularly Georgia. See: Uwe Halbach (2001). "Islam in the North Caucasus." *Archives de sciences sociales des religions*. 115 (July-September), p. 3. <http://assr.revues.org/18403?lang=en>. Last accessed 10 October 2014.

⁸⁶ Halbach (2001), p. 38.

⁸⁷ Habib was born in Amman in 1948. He studied in Germany and the United States before traveling to Afghanistan in the early 1980s. There, he was active in Al-Ittihad al-Islami *aka* "Islamic Unification" or "AIAI," a movement led by Abd Rab El-Raswl Sayaf. Habib went to Chechnya in the early 1990s where, "using his knowledge of Chechen language and customs," he began *Da'awa*, establishing a religious educational institute and sending students to study in Arab countries. He died of natural causes in August 1997. Murad Batal al-Shishani (2006). *The Rise and Fall of Arab Fighters in Chechnya*. (Washington, D.C.: The Jamestown Foundation), p. 20.

http://www.jamestown.org/fileadmin/Recent_Reports/Trans_and_Speaker_NCC09142006/Al-Shishani-14Sep06.pdf. Last accessed 16 September 2014] Habib's mentor, Abd al-Rab Rasul Sayyaf, was an ethnic Pashtun who joined the Islamic Brotherhood as a student in Cairo, later returning to Afghanistan to teach theology at Kabul University. He founded the Islamic Union in 1980, and used his command of Arabic to recruit wealthy donors in the Arab world.

⁸⁸ Called "Islamic Group" or "IG" in the West, *Gama'a al-Islamiyya* is an Egyptian Sunnī organization also known by the Arabic transliterations *al Gama'at al Islamiyya* and *al-Jama'at al-Islamiya*. It unofficially split into two factions in 1997, one under the leadership of Rifa'i Taha Musa, who later signed Osama bin Laden's 1998 *fatwa*. Musa went missing in 2001, several months after publishing a book justifying militant operations that produce mass casualties.

foreign volunteers' military unit was another Jordanian Chechen, Fathi al-Jordani *aka* Sheik Mohammad Fatih.⁸⁹ His "Arab Mujahideen in Chechnya"⁹⁰ consisted of some 100-200 volunteers⁹¹ who served alongside more than a thousand North Caucasian Chechens. Fathi Habib was succeeded by another Jordanian Chechen, Habib Abdul Rahman,⁹² more commonly known as Ibn al-Khattab or Amir Khattab.⁹³ He first came to Chechnya in 1995 at Fathi Habib's encouragement, and together, "they advanced a reading of defensive Jihad which resonated with small groups of local volunteers and found purchase in other circles of volunteers from the Chechen diaspora."⁹⁴ Khattab was killed in 2000, and succeeded by a Saudi national who also used the *nom de guerre* Khattab⁹⁵ and was himself killed in 2002. He in turn was succeeded by Amir Abu al-Walid (*aka* Abd al-Aziz al-Ghamidi) who was identified variably as a Jordanian Chechen or a Saudi national.⁹⁶ Walid was reportedly killed in April 2004 in Vedenov, a rural town in Chechnya's Vedensky District.

⁸⁹ "A wealthy Jordanian Islamist and veteran of the Afghan War, Sheikh Muhammad Fatih, founded boarding schools and orphanages in Urus-Martan, and Islamist mosques in Urus-Martan and Gudermes to compete with the Sufi mosques." See: Anssi Kullberg (2003). "The Background of Chechen Independence." *The Eurasian Politician* [1 October 2003]. This finding was confirmed in a second source: "a wealthy Jordanian Arab veteran of the Afghan conflict, Sheikh Muhammad Fatih...began distributing funds for Wahhabi missionary activities. At this time, Wahhabi-funded fundamentalist mosques were also built in Urus Martan and Chechnya's second largest town, Gudermes." Brian Glyn Williams (2003). "Jihad and Ethnicity in Post-Communist Eurasia. On the Trail of Transnational Islamic Holy Warriors in Kashmir, Afghanistan, Central Asia, Chechnya and Kosovo." *The Global Review of Ethnopolitics*. 2:3-4, p. 17. http://www.ethnopolitics.org/ethnopolitics/archive/volume_II/issue_3-4/issue3-4.pdf. Last accessed 16 September 2014]

⁹⁰ Russian: Арабские моджахеды в Чечне. Russian transl.: *Arabskiye Muzhakhady v Chechnye*.

⁹¹ Russian officials consistently referred to foreign fighters in Chechnya as *nayemniki*, which is the transliteration of the Russian word for mercenaries (Russian: наемники). The *nayemniki* in question consisted for the most part of Arab and Turkish *muwahideen*.

⁹² The "Khattab Brigade" in the current conflict in the al-Sham takes its name from Emir Khattab. It formed the *Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar* or "Army of Emigrants and Supporters" formerly known as the "Muhajireen Brigade" (*Katibat al-Muhajireen*) which fought in and around Aleppo with both the Free Syrian Army and Islamic State.

⁹³ The name "Amir Khattab" is sometimes transliterated as *Emir Khattab* or *Ameer Khattab*. Other *nom de guerre* include "Khattab", and in one report, "Akhmed the One-armed." Sergei Markedonov (2008). "Outsourced Jihad?" *Russian Profile* [online English edition, 1 March 2008]. http://russiaprofile.org/international/a1204371393/print_edition/. Last accessed 16 September 2014. At the time he wrote the article, Markedonov was head of the Interethnic Relations Department at the Institute of Political and Military Analysis in Moscow.

⁹⁴ Stuart Croft & Cerwyn Moore (2010). "The evolution of threat narratives in the age of terror: understanding terrorist threats in Britain." *International Affairs*. 84:4, p. 833. http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/public/International%20Affairs/2010/86_4croftmoore.pdf. Last accessed 23 September 2014.

⁹⁵ A Saudi national, Khattab's real name was Samir Saleh Abdullah al-Suwailem. He was killed in March 2002: there are two versions of his death, one that he died after opening an anthrax tainted letter handed to him by a trusted aide, who was given the letter by the Russian FSB; and the other, that he ate poisoned food at a private party.

⁹⁶ While in Afghanistan, Al-Walid trained for two years at the Afghan Services Bureau [*aka* Maktab al-Khidamat (MAK) or Maktab Khadamāt al-Mujāhidīn al-'Arab], an intake and processing center for Arab *muwahideen* established by the Jordanian Arab, Abdullah Yusuf Azzam.

Two later emirs, Abu Hafs al-Urdani⁹⁷ (*aka* "Amjet") and Khaled Yusef Muhamed al-Emirat⁹⁸ (*aka* "Emir Muhannad") are believed to have been Jordanian nationals though it is not clear whether one or both were ethnic Chechens. Al-Urdani is believed to have entered Chechnya in 2002 from Georgia's Pankisi Gorge, and commanded an estimated force of 80 Arab and Turkish fighters. He was identified by the United States and Russian intelligence services as a key al-Qa'ida liaison: the United States National Security Agency intercepted a telephone call placed from Afghanistan to al-Urdani on 11 September 2001 predicting the attack on the second tower of the World Trade Center.

Diaspora Chechens took increasing notice of events in Chechnya, and cautiously expressed support for their kinsmen within the bounds of Jordan's limits on political activism. In November 1999, Jordanian Chechens:

“[S]taged a demonstration in Amman late last week - held at bay for weeks by the government here - to call the world's attention to Russian actions. They say Russia is waging an 'ethnic cleansing' campaign in Chechnya that is largely being ignored by the West. 'They are killing our people, and the whole world has closed its eyes,' says Polla Daghestani, a Chechen mother amid a small crowd waving nationalist posters. 'The silence is shameful'.”⁹⁹

Said one Jordanian, “Omar Shishani, a young Chechen who closely watches news of the Russian offensive in Chechnya”:

“I would do anything to go there to fight for our freedom...Many in the Chechen diaspora see a double standard in the West and question why NATO intervened to save a threatened Muslim minority in Kosovo, but has been slow

⁹⁷ Born Farid Yusef Umeira (sometimes spelled "Amerat") in Jordan in 1966, Abu Hafs obtained a Saudi passport and entered Chechnya sometime in 1995 or 1996, eventually marrying a Chechen woman. In 2002, he became al-Qa'ida's representative in Georgia where he went by the name "Amjad". According to the United States State Department, "the AQ-linked, Jordanian-born commander of foreign separatist forces in Chechnya, was killed by security forces" in November 2006 [see: US State Department (2007). "Country Reports on Terrorism." Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, 30 April 2007. <http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2006/82732.htm>. Last accessed 16 September 2014]. Abu Hafs is mentioned in *The September 11 Commission Report* [pp. 82-83]; however, it is believed that most biographical information about him originated from the Russian intelligence services.

⁹⁸ Khaled Yusef Muhamed Al-Emirat (sometimes spelled "al-Elitat ") was killed in Chechnya's Sali district on 22 April 2011. Russia's National Counter-Terrorism Committee reported, "one of the people killed during a special operation in Chechnya was an Arab hireling, chief emissary of al-Qaeda under the alias 'Moganned'," the Russian transliteration of "Muhannad". ["НАК: один из убитых в Чечне боевиков является эмиссаром 'Аль-Каиды' на Северном Кавказе." *Кавказский узел* (online Russian language edition, 22 April 2011). <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/184167/>. Last accessed 16 September 2014] He was identified by Russian Alkhavon, Chechnya's Interior minister at the time, as "the chief representative of Al-Qaeda in the North Caucasus." ["Kadyrov says Chechen militants, Al-Qaeda emissaries 'exist in severe conditions'." *RIA-Novosti* [online English language edition, 15 April 2011]. <http://rt.com/politics/kadyrov-chechnya-militants-emissary/>. Last accessed 16 September 2014]

⁹⁹ Scott Peterson (1999). "Chechen diaspora rallies." *The Christian Science Monitor* [online edition, 29 November 1999]. <http://www.csmonitor.com/1999/1129/p6s1.html>. Last accessed 16 September 2014.

to pressure Moscow despite actions widely condemned by human rights groups.”¹⁰⁰

In 1994 a Diaspora Chechen member of the Jordanian cabinet, Sheikh Abdel Baqui Jummo, called for Chechen self-rule within the Russian Federation. Two Jordanian legislators, Said Bino and Tujan Faisal, forced a debate on the Russian-backed rebellion against Dzhokhar Dudayev, the first President of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeri. Foreshadowing that infighting is not limited to the Chechen *jama'ats* in Syria, followers of Sheikh Jummo threatened to cut out the tongue of Tujan Faisal after she called him "a Russian stooge." That same year, an Islamic charity brought to Jordan for treatment some 70 wounded Chechen fighters. A decade later, persons identified as "Jordanians of Chechen origin" staged a March 2005 sit-in outside the United Nations office in Amman, "demanding it pressure Russian authorities to hand over the remains of assassinated Chechen separatist leader, Aslan Maskhadov," who had been elected Chechnya's president and was killed on 8 March in a village north of Grozny.¹⁰¹

THE TRANSITION TO SYRIA: UNDERSTANDING THE NAME

"There will be sent out armies: an army in Syria, an army in Iraq, and an army in Yemen. His Companion arose and said, 'Choose one for me, O Messenger of God!' He replied, 'Go to Syria; for whoever refuses, let him keep to his Yemen, and draw water from its ponds. For God vouched to me for Syria, and for its people. Whomever God vouches for will never meet ruin'."¹⁰²

Kitab fadā'il al-shām wa-dimashq, 5, variant nos. 14-16.

Deracinating the conflict in al-Sham from its foundation in Islamic theology is misguided and certain to yield spurious conclusions. So, to properly assess the conflict, a good starting point is to understand the meaning of the historical place-name "Syria" as used by Dā'ish, which often is conflated with the modern nation-state *Suriya*.¹⁰³ The former, known by the Arabic transliteration *al-Sham*, is a much larger geographic territory that extends from Egypt east to the Euphrates River in modern Iraq;¹⁰⁴ and from Turkey's Taurus Mountains south to the Red Sea. The territory of *al-Sham* incorporates all or substantial parts of modern Iraq, Syria,

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ "Chechens in Jordan launch protest." *Al-Jazeera* [online English language edition, 15 March 2005]. <http://www.aljazeera.com/archive/2005/03/20084913471241697.html>. Last accessed 17 September 2014. Russia's FSB said it paid a \$10 Million reward for information that led to the location and killing of Maskhadov. He reportedly was wounded by FSB paramilitary forces and then shot by his bodyguards to avoid capture; a few days later, the FSB razed the house in which he was killed. Maskhadov had been appointed Prime Minister of Ichkeria in 1996 and elected its president in 1997. In 1999, Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin declared Maskhadov's election illegitimate and sent Russian forces into Chechnya, marking the start of the Second Chechen War, which lasted until Maskhadov declared a cease-fire in February 2005.

¹⁰² al-Rabā'ī (1950), *op cit.*, 5, variant nos. 14-16. Cited in Cobb (2002), *op cit.*, p. 45.

¹⁰³ Formally, the Syrian Arab Republic [Arabic transl.: *al-Jumhūrīyah al-'Arabīyah al-Sūrīyah*].

¹⁰⁴ "Verily, God has blessed Syria from the Euphrates to al-'Arīsh." Al-Rabā'ī (1950), 11. Cited in Cobb (2002), 45. Cf. Genesis 15:18-19, "On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abraham, saying, 'To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates'."

Lebanon, Jordan and Israel, and smaller parts of Turkey and Saudi Arabia. In Ibn Māja's¹⁰⁵ traditions, *al-Sham* is to be treated as one immense *ribat*¹⁰⁶:

“Whoever stays in one of its cities, he is in a *ribat*; whoever stays in one of its frontier-fortresses, he is on *jihad*.”¹⁰⁷

And at the end-times,¹⁰⁸ “when the time of trials comes, true belief will be in Syria”:¹⁰⁹

“On the day of the greatest battle of the Apocalypse, the encampment of the Muslims will be in a land called *Ghūṭa* [the oasis of Damascus] which is in a city called Damascus, the best dwelling place for Muslims on that day.”¹¹⁰

As to the Syrian capital, Damascus, it “shall be the city with the most pious heroes, ascetics, and mosques. It shall be for its people a refuge, the most well-protected, populous, and wealthy of cities.”

"THE SECOND BIN LADEN ARRIVED IN SYRIA FROM RUSSIA."¹¹¹

Fast forward to today, while the North Caucasian Chechen insurgency weakened considerably after 2006, the conspicuous emergence of Chechen fighters in the Syrian civil war — one

¹⁰⁵ Ibn Māja *aka* Alī ibn Muammad al-Rabaʿī (d. 1052CE) was one of the six principal compilers of Islamic tradition or *hadīth* in Sunnī Islam.

¹⁰⁶ The literal meaning of *ribat* is a small frontier outpost or fort, but its more common use is metaphorical to indicate the duty to remain vigilant against infidels. In Sufism, *ribat* came to mean something closer to a spiritual retreat or place to congregate under the protection of a Sufi *shaykh*.

¹⁰⁷ Paul J. Cobb (2014). *The Race for Paradise: An Islamic History of the Crusades*. (New York: Oxford University Press), p. 34.

¹⁰⁸ Though well outside the focus of this essay, the Islamic view of the end-times is one that witnesses the world's death and an age of *fitan* or trials. The *hadīth* refers to the end-times as the "Last Hour."

¹⁰⁹ Al-Rabaʿī, *op cit.*, 8 (no. 11) variant nos. 21 & 22. Cited in Cobb, p. 43.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 20 (no. 35) variant nos. 28, 51; and Cobb, 43.

¹¹¹ Taken from a Russian-language profile titled "Who is General 'Red Beard' Umar al-Shishani?" The full sentence reads in the original Russian: "Мхабарат Сирии считает, что второй Бен Ладен прибыл в Сирию из России" ("Syrian intelligence believes that the second bin Laden arrived in Syria from Russia"). See: "Кто такой Умар Аш-Шишани, генерал «рыжая борода»?" *Ныхас* [online Russian language version, 11 July 2014]. Abu-Umar al-Shishani was the subject of an extended profile published on the website «Ныхас» [Russian transl.: *Nykhhas*, from the Ossetian verb "to talk"] in which he is described as the "28 year-old red-haired General" of Islamic State's northern sector and a former sergeant in the Georgian army. He was appointed in late 2013 by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, Islamic State's caliph in Iraq and Syria. As one Russian language news source put it, "He became the face of the terrorist organization 'Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant'." Игорь Копылов (2014). "Новый Халифат. За ислам или против России?" *Россия Освободится Нашими Силами* [online Russian language edition, 6 July 2014]. <http://ronsslav.com/igor-kopylov-novyy-halifat-za-islam-ili-protiv-rossii/>. Last accessed 21 September 2014] In September 2014, he was erroneously reported killed near the Syrian-Turkish border town of Atma during a battle with forces of the YPG (Kurdish: *Yekîneyên Parastina Gel*), the armed wing of the Kurdish Supreme Committee of Syrian Kurdistan.

analyst called them “a Chechen al-Qaeda”¹¹² — signified an important, albeit underappreciated, reorientation of a hitherto strongly nationalist movement.

North Caucasian and Diaspora Chechens together comprise the largest non-Arab group in the anti-Assad insurgency. They bring often-substantial military experience to bear in spectacular (and sometimes successful) operations against Syrian government forces. Only their fragmentation — reflecting in part the larger rift between Dā‘ish and Jabhat al-Nusra, both of which emerged out of a split within Al-Qa’ida in Iraq — prevents them from playing an even larger role.¹¹³

Chechen fighters in Syria are distributed across several *jama'ats*, some of which are aligned with Dā‘ish's northern branch; others with Jabhat al-Nusra, and still others that have no formal alignment with either but may from time to time coordinate operations with one or both. At the start of 2014, the principal Chechen *jama'ats* were commanded by, respectively, Abu-Umar al-Shishani,¹¹⁴ Sayfullakh al-Shishani,¹¹⁵ Amir Muslim Abu Walid Shishani,¹¹⁶ and Salahudeen al-Shishani.¹¹⁷ As one analyst wrote, the varying alignments and leadership among Chechen-dominated *jama'ats* in Syria express:

“Essentially a struggle for prestige among North Caucasian jihadis in Syria and their supporters. The North Caucasian infighting has grown out of an ideological battle over which faction has the 'correct' approach to jihad in general and the jihad 'back home' in the North Caucasus in particular; how the jihad in Syria relates to the Caucasus Emirate’s struggle in the North Caucasus;

¹¹² Taken from the title of an analysis by the German Institute for International and Security Affairs. Guido Steinberg (2014). "A Chechen al-Qaeda? Caucasian Groups Further Internationalize the Syrian Struggle." *SWP Comments* 31. http://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/comments/2014C31_sbg.pdf. Last accessed 22 September 2014.

¹¹³ Steinberg (2014), pp. 1-2.

¹¹⁴ Abu-Umar al-Shishani is the *nom de guerre* of Tarkhan Tayumurazovich Batirashvili, a Chechen from the village of Birkiani or Jokolo in Georgia's Pankisi Gorge. Analysts believe he came to Syria in early 2012 from Georgia by way of Egypt and Turkey.

¹¹⁵ Sayfullakh Shishani is the *nom de guerre* of Ruslan Machalikashvili, a Chechen from Georgia's Pankisi Gorge. He came to Syria from Turkey in late 2012, and was killed in a February 2013 failed raid on Aleppo's Central Prison. Earlier, he served as Umar al-Shishani's deputy, but accused him of *fitna* or sedition when Umar swore an oath to Dā‘ish leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and eschewed his former affiliation.

¹¹⁶ Amir Muslim Abu Walid Shishani *aka* Muslim Shishani is the *nom de guerre* of Murad Iraklievich Margoshvili *aka* Murad Madayev. He is an ethnic Kist (a Chechen subethos that migrated to Georgia's Pankisi Gorge in the 19th century) from Akhmeta in eastern Georgia. He took his *nom de guerre* from Abu al-Walid, who succeeded Ibn al-Khattab (a Saudi whom Russian forces assassinated in 2002) as the commander of al-Qa’ida's International Islamic Brigade in Chechnya. In November 2003 Abu Walid was arrested in Ingushetia on suspicion of organizing the June 2003 "Mozdok Bombings" (in which a Black Widows suicide bomber threw herself under a bus carrying Russian army helicopter pilots and killed at least 17 people) but was acquitted of all charges in February 2006. In Syria, he took a loyalty oath to the then Amir of the Caucasus Emirate, Dokku Umarov, but elected to operate his *jama'at* as an independent faction until he aligned with the JKA and the JAS in August 2013.

¹¹⁷ Salahuddin al-Shishani is a Chechen military commander who was notably critical when Islamic State claimed in January 2014 to have attacked the Free Syrian Army and other insurgent groups, saying he preferred to fight the Assad regime. The Arabic transliteration *al-Shishani* means "the Chechen" and is used often by North Caucasian Chechens in al-Sham as part of their chosen *nom de guerre*.

and the circumstances under which North Caucasians may wage jihad in Syria instead of at home.”¹¹⁸

Some additional background may be useful at this point. The two main jihadist groupings in Syria are *Jabhat al-Nusra* (aka "the al-Nusra Front") and Dā'ish. Jabhat al-Nusra was formed by Al-Qa'ida in Iraq (AQI) in late 2011 when its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, sent an operative, Abu Mohammad al-Julani,¹¹⁹ to return to Syria to reestablish networks lost in a late 2007 crackdown by Syrian intelligence. In mid-2013, a new group, the "Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant" developed out of a split within AQI from which ISIL (now ISIS, the "Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham") and Jabhat al-Nusra emerged as separate entities.¹²⁰ The somewhat convoluted chain of events that led to this split is elaborated in the footnote below.

How does this relate to Chechens fighting in the conflict in al-Sham? Most Chechen-dominated *jama'ats* aligned with Jabhat al-Nusra or Dā'ish were earlier part of another group, *Jaish al-Muhajireen wa'l-Ansar*¹²¹ (JMA). It was formed in mid-2012 from the merger of two

¹¹⁸ Paraszczuk (2014), *op cit*.

¹¹⁹ Abu Mohammad al-Julani is a *nom de guerre* that sometimes appears "al-Golani". There is considerable doubt as to his actual identity although his name would seem to indicate that he is Syrian with family ties to the Golan Heights.

¹²⁰ Several years earlier, in 2002, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi sent a number of Syrians who had been with him in Afghanistan to return to Syria and Lebanon for the purpose of building networks there. Al-Zarqawi was killed in June 2006 and succeeded by Abu Ayyub al-Masri, who formed the "Islamic State of Iraq" (ISI) under the leadership of Abu Umar al-Baghdad. When the Syrian intelligence service cracked down on these networks in late 2007, Abu Mohammed al-Julani, whom Abu Umar earlier sent to Syria, fled to Iraq along with other operatives and did not return until some time in 2011. In the meantime, both Abu Ayyub and Abu Umar were killed in an April 2010 airstrike. They were succeeded by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who in April 2013 changed AQI's public name to the "Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant" (ISIL). His claim that ISIL was formed from the "merger" of AQI and Jabhat al-Nusra was disputed by al-Julani, however, who pledged allegiance to al-Qa'ida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri.

The Beirut-based *Al-Akhbar* published a fascinating account in January 2014 purporting to explain the falling out between AQI and Jabhat al-Nusra. The report was based on a series of Twitter messages from an unnamed "former leader of ISIS, before he defected and joined al-Nusra Front." [<http://english.al-akhbar.com/content/al-qaeda-leaks-baghdadi-and-golani-fight-over-levant-emirate>] According to the *Al-Akhbar* account, Abu Bakr first established Jabhat al-Nusra as a non-Iraqi battalion in Syria under the command of a Syrian (al-Julani) in order to preclude Iraqi ISI members from going to Syria without his prior consent. Sources suggest Abu Bakr later became concerned that Jabhat al-Nusra was overshadowing ISI, and ordered al-Julani to state publicly that Jabhat al-Nusra was under Abu Bakr's leadership, something al-Julani declined to do. At a subsequent meeting in Turkey, Abu Bakr ordered al-Julani to conduct a military operation targeting the leadership of the Free Syrian Army, something which Jabhat al-Nusra's *shura* rejected. When Abu Bakr sent emissaries to propose merging the two groups to form what became ISIL, some of these emissaries were accused of *takfir* (the practice of declaring another to be a *kafir*, i.e., an apostate or unbeliever) and jailed. Abu Bakr was determined nevertheless to announce the merger. His assistant, a former Iraqi army colonel called Hajji Bakr, proposed that ISI announce it was dissolving Jabhat al-Nusra but give its leaders advance notice to declare their allegiance to Abu Bakr, and to come to Syria for the announcement. This had the effect of splitting Jabhat al-Nusra three ways, one faction aligning with Abu Bakr (under a former Saudi officer named Bandar al-Shaalan); one remaining loyal to al-Julani; and a third declaring itself neutral. Once Abu Bakr learned al-Julani was preparing to announce that he would not disband Jabhat al-Nusra, Hajji Bakr proposed seizing al-Julani's arms caches and assassinating him and his allies. Al-Julani reacted by going directly to al-Zawahiri and issuing his statement refusing to disband Jabhat al-Nusra.

¹²¹ The name means "Army of Emigrants and Supporters".

jama'ats, *Jaish al-Khilafa al-Islamiyya*¹²² (JKI) led by Sayfullakh al-Shishani, and another led by Abu-Umar al-Shishani. Within a few months, Sayfullakh fell out with Abu-Umar and in August 2012 was expelled from JMA along with 30 other Chechens. When Abu-Umar swore allegiance to Dā'ish's Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in November 2013 and left JMA, another Chechen, Salahudeen al-Shishani took command and pledged allegiance to the then-emir of the Caucasus Emirate, Dokku Umarov.¹²³ Asked about conflict among the several Chechen *jama'ats*, Salahuddin replied simply, "It is does not matter how it started; what matters is that this discord has been brewing for a long time."¹²⁴

For his part, Sayfullakh went on to reestablish his *jama'at* (once again as JKI) and to realign with JMA. He also associated JKI informally with two other *jama'ats*: the first, *Junud al-Sham*,¹²⁵ led by a Chechen, Amir Muslim Abu Walid Shishani; and the second, the predominantly Syrian *Ansar al-Sham*,¹²⁶ led by a Chechen military commander, Abu Musa al-Shishani.¹²⁷ Abu Walid published an extended text on his website¹²⁸ implicitly criticizing Islamic State by contrasting the Syrian conflict to earlier ones in Chechnya and Ingushetia. It reads in part:

"But here, anyone can gather 20 people around him and say on the Internet that he is ready to sweep away all the Alawites, if only he had help with finance and Mujahideen, because he doesn't have any military experience. And there are people here who, in spite of all this, begin to finance him and he starts to get men, deceived by these loud statements."

¹²² The Arabic transliteration *Jaish al-Khilafa al-Islamiyya* means "The Islamic Caliphate Army."

¹²³ Salahuddin's deputy commander is Abdul Karim Krymsky, a Crimean Tatar from Ukraine. Krymsky has called on Crimean Tatars to join him in Syria and follow the example of the Caucasus Emirate by "starting on the path of jihad." [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZrXE5YQ246E>. Krymsky is seated on the right] and is sometimes referred to as "the leader of the Crimean Tatars' *jamaat* in Syria, Emir Abdul-Karim Krymsky." While outside the scope of this essay, one analyst speculates whether Krymsky might eventually elect to join forces with the outlawed "several thousand-member Hizb ut-Tahrir in Crimea." Hizb ut-Tahrir has "an extensive network across the peninsula but have no expertise in fighting a guerrilla war"; Krymsky has "experience fighting against al-Assad's regime in Syria, but does not have an extensive social base in Crimea." See: Mairbek Vatchagaev (2014). "Will Crimean Tatar Jihadists Join Forces With the Caucasus Emirate?" *The North Caucasus Weekly* [online edition, 22 May 2014].

http://www.jamestown.org/programs/nc/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=42409&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=423&no_cache=1. Last accessed 19 September 2014.

¹²⁴ "Амир Джейш Мухаджирин ва Ансар Салахуддин Шишани о последних событиях в Сирии." *Kavkaz Center* [online Russian language edition, 14 January 2014]. The full quoted text reads in the original Russian: "И с чего началось, не важно, важно то, что эта фитна назревала давно."

<http://www.kavkazcenter.com/russ/content/2014/01/14/102777.shtml>. Last accessed 19 September 2014.

¹²⁵ The Arabic transliteration *Junud al-Sham* means "Soldiers of Syria."

¹²⁶ The Arabic transliteration *Ansar al-Sham* means "Supporters of the Levant."

¹²⁷ Sayfullakh explained his intention to work cooperatively with Abu Walid and Abu Musa in an October 2013 YouTube video (since removed) titled "The Unification, and Clarifications regarding the Disagreements."

¹²⁸ <http://shamcenter.info/насиха-амира-муслима-муджахидам-шама/>. Last accessed 19 September 2014. Joanna Paraszczuk wrote an excellent analysis of this text. [Paraszczuk (2014).] "Syria: Muslim Abu Walid Shishani of Jundu Sham in his own words." *From Chechnya to Syria* [online English edition, 28 March 2014]. <http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=21346>. Last accessed 19 September 2014]

In December 2013, JKI participated in the capture of Aleppo's Kindi Hospital,¹²⁹ which Syrian government forces had earlier converted into military barracks.¹³⁰ Kindi had been under siege since April by Islamic State's *Liwa al-Tawhid* and *Ahrar al-Sham* units with support from Jabhat al-Nusra. Sayfullakh appeared in a 22 December video posted on his official *Usudusham* YouTube channel¹³¹ and gave a walking tour of the battlefield; two days later, he announced via Twitter that JKI had joined Jabhat al-Nusra.

In late July 2014, a heretofore-unknown Chechen group, *Jamaat Ahadun Ahad*¹³² (JAA), announced that it had organized in Syria under a North Caucasus Chechen commander named Amir Al-Bara Shishani *aka* Saifullah Shishani.¹³³ JAA formed from *muhajireen* groups that were involved in the 2014 offensive in Syria's Latakia Province, after which remnants of these groups remained in Kessab.¹³⁴ It issued the following declaration via Twitter:

“We are not a new group. We have united some independent muhajireen groups here in Shaam...The shoura council consists of mujahideen with a great past on the lands of jihad in Chechnya and Afghanistan...Our group has never previously, and doesn't currently belong to any fractions.” [sic]

Two Chechen-led groups, Junud al-Sham and Ansar Sham, participated in the Latakia offensive along with Jabhat al-Nusra, al-Jabhat al-Islāmiyyah,¹³⁵ and Harakat Sham al-Islam.¹³⁶ Analysts believe JAA is based in northern Latakia province, in either Jabal al-Akrād¹³⁷ or Jabal al-Turkman¹³⁸ near the Syrian-Turkish border. Its leadership announced in an 11

¹²⁹ "Syrian Mujahideen capture Kindi barracks in Aleppo." *Kavkaz Center* [online English language edition, 20 December 2013]. <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/eng/content/2013/12/20/18696.shtml>. Last accessed 19 September 2014.

¹³⁰ Scott Lucas (2013). "Syria: Insurgents Captured Kindi Barracks in Aleppo." *EA World View* [online English language edition, 20 December 2013]. <http://eaworldview.com/2013/12/syria-insurgents-capture-kindi-hospital-aleppo/>. Last accessed 19 September 2014.

¹³¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dYgdxv8o8b0h>

¹³² The name means "The Group of the One and Only."

¹³³ *Saifullah* is an honorific given to indicate military prowess and means "the sword of God." Little is known about Al-Bara, who claimed via Twitter [posted 10 August 2014; his account has since been suspended] to have fought in Afghanistan.

¹³⁴ The self-identified British jihadi, Abu Fulan al-Muhajir (@Fulan2weet), posted the following message on Twitter on 26 July 2014: *Remember when #Kessab fell? And some group of muhajireen were the last to leave? That was us. #AhadunAhad.* The "Kessab" reference is to a campaign also known as the "al-Anfal Campaign on the Syrian Coast" launched 21 March 2014. [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C-ngB4fOZOw>]

¹³⁵ The Arabic transliteration *al-Jabhat al-Islāmiyyah* means "Islamic Front". It was formed in a November 2013 consolidation of several groups, and is sometimes confused with the now-defunct Syrian Islamic Front also known by its Arabic transliteration, *al-Jabhat al-Islāmiyya as-Sūriyyah*.

¹³⁶ The Arabic transliteration *Harakat Sham al-Islam* means "Islamic Movement of the Levant". Harakat Sham al-Islam is comprised mostly of Moroccans.

¹³⁷ The Arabic transliteration *Jabal al-Akrād* means "the mountain of the Kurds," or *Çiyayê Kuran* in Kurdish.

¹³⁸ The Arabic transliteration *Jabal al-Turkman* [means "the mountain of the Turkmen." Though outside the scope of this essay, Syria's mostly Sunnī Turkmen are a significant ethnic minority community, particularly in parts of Syria and Iraq that have been the scene of significant conflict. See: Nicholas A. Heras (2013). "Syrian Turkmen Join Opposition Forces in Pursuit of a New Syrian Identity." *Terrorism Monitor* [online edition, 30 May 2013]. 11:11.

http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=40961&no_cache=1#.VCH7E0u4n8s. Last

September 2014 online posting that JAA was aligning with Jabhat al-Nusra against Dā'ish,¹³⁹ following another North Caucasus Chechen-led faction, *Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar* (JMA)¹⁴⁰ that had done so earlier. JMA was formed in mid-2012 from the merger of two *jama'ats*, the first of which was known informally as "Sayfullah al-Shishani's jama'at" and led by a North Caucasus Chechen, Sayfullakh Shishani Abu Samir al-Ansari, who was killed in a failed 2013 raid on Aleppo's Central Prison. The other was led by another North Caucasus Chechen, Abu-Umar al-Shishani, who after a falling out with Sayfullah withdrew his *jama'at* from Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar and aligned with Dā'ish.

Whether Abu-Umar al-Shishani has yet risen to the level of "the second bin Laden" is open for dispute.¹⁴¹ He was named Dā'ish's northern military commander after the death of Abu Abdel Rahman al-Anbari, and leads the al-Aqsa Brigade, a group described as "effectively Umar's jamaat within IS and includes fighters who transferred with him to then ISIS from Umar's former faction, Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar."¹⁴² What is beyond dispute is the al-Aqsa Brigade's brutality — witness its slaughter of some 250 Syrian soldiers near Raqqa in August¹⁴³ — and its effectiveness in the current battle for Kobani (persistent reports aside that Abu-Umar was killed there in the past few days by Kurdish YPG forces¹⁴⁴).

accessed 23 September 2014. The Syrian government has charged ethnic Turkmens with being militantly pro-Turkey and supporting the re-imposition of Turkish dominance over Syria. See: Marah Mashi (2012). "Syria's Turkmens Join the Fight." *Al-Akhbar* [online English language edition, 28 August 2012]. <http://english.al-akhbar.com/content/syrias-turkmens-join-fight>. Last accessed 23 September 2014. The article quotes one Syrian saying, "The Turkish devil is inciting the Turkmens. This proves their allegiance is not to Syria."

¹³⁹ See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Iv0UDuSzc3g>. The video's Russian title "Рибат против хариджитов 'давя'. Обращение к хариджитам." ["*Ribat* Against the Kharijites. Appeal to the Kharijites."] includes an Arabic transliteration, *Khawārij*, that means "those who went out," a reference to Muslims who come to reject the caliph's leadership.

¹⁴⁰ The Arabic transliteration *Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar* means "Army of Emigrants and Supporters".

¹⁴¹ The same, too, can be said about his earlier activities in Georgia and the circumstances under which he came to Syria.

¹⁴² Joanna Parasczuk (2014). "Umar Shishani Gets His Al Aqsa Brigade to Swear Loyalty Oath to Baghdadi." *From Chechnya to Syria* [online edition, 15 August 2014]. <http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=22363>. Last accessed 15 October 2014.

¹⁴³ Scott Lucas (2014). "Syria Daily, August 29: The Islamic State's Mass Execution of Assad Troops Near Raqqa." *EA World View* [online edition, 29 August 2014]. <http://eaworldview.com/2014/08/syria-daily-islamic-states-mass-execution-assad-troops-near-raqqa/>. Last accessed 15 October 2014.

¹⁴⁴ For example, an Arabic language report of "the death of the Chechen military leader on the outskirts of Kobani": <http://moheet.com/2014/10/09/2151981/ف-ي-جنوده-من-1200-م-سمي-م-لا-خل-ي-فة-مقتل-سور.html#.VD6LRr64mX0>. Last accessed 15 October 2014. Moheet is a Dubai-based Arabic news portal. It also reported the dubious claim that the Free Syrian Army had poisoned some 1200 Dā'ish fighters with adulterated lunches in the eastern Syrian province of Deir al-Zour.

“TODAY, SYRIA, TOMORROW RUSSIA!”¹⁴⁵

In December 2013, Ramzan Kadyrov announced that Chechnya formed a “special unit that, if necessary, was prepared to intervene in the Syrian conflict to neutralize Syrian rebels that threatened Russia...[who] need to know what to expect if they turn here in Russia.”¹⁴⁶ In reporting Kadyrov's announcement, a Russian-language Chechen pro-jihadi website stated that “the ringleader of the Chechen apostates...is worried that if the Mujahideen come to the Caucasus, losses among the Russian infidels will greatly increase.” It went on to assert “recent evidence of Russian mercenaries in the war on the side of the Shia and Alawite Assad regime.”¹⁴⁷

“The persistence of Syrian armed forces and the failure of the Syrian Free Army favor Russia's security interests,” wrote Rais Ravikovich Suleymanov in a May 2013 essay.¹⁴⁸ The director of Russia's FSB, Alexander Bortnikov, estimated at the time that there were “about 200 Russians fighting against the legitimate government of Syria,” recruited through social media from among “Russian Wahhabi, who quietly come to Turkey as tourists, before being sent to Syria.”¹⁴⁹ Chechen fighters in al-Sham who return home can expect harsh treatment: one “local resident who fought as a mercenary in Syria” was arrested and charged with criminal offenses punishable by seven years' imprisonment, according to a published report.¹⁵⁰ In August, a Chechen, Rustam Karimov, was sentenced to three years in a penal colony for fighting in Syria, the first criminal case of its kind.¹⁵¹ The harshness of these sentences notwithstanding,

¹⁴⁵ Раис Равкатович Сулейманов (2013). “КАРТ-БЛАНШ. Ваххабитский интернационал: сегодня Сирия, завтра Россия.” *Независимая газета* [online Russian language edition, 22 May 2013]. http://www.ng.ru/regions/2013-05-22/3_kartblansh.html. Last accessed 21 September 2014. The full quote reads in the original Russian: Стены домов в тех сирийских городах, которые занимали исламисты после их освобождения правительственной армией, были исписаны по-арабски и по-русски: «Сегодня Сирия, завтра Россия!» (“The walls of houses in those Syrian cities occupied by the Islamists until they were reclaimed by the Syrian army were inscribed in Arabic and in Russian: ‘Today, Syria, tomorrow Russia!’”)

¹⁴⁶ The quoted text reads in full in the original Russian: “Глава Чечни Рамзан Кадыров заявил, что в регионе готовят спецподразделение, которое при необходимости может принять участие в нейтрализации сирийских боевиков, представляющих угрозу для России.”; and “террористы в Сирии должны знать, что их ждет в России, если они сюда сунутся.” See: “В Чечне создается спецподразделение для борьбы с сирийскими боевиками.” *RIA-Novosti* [online Russian language version, 12 April 2014]. http://ria.ru/defense_safety/20131204/981977265.html. Last accessed 19 September 2014.

¹⁴⁷ “Главарь муртадов Кадыров объявил войну моджахедам Сирии.” *KavkazCenter.com* [online Russian language version, 4 December 2013]. <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/russ/content/2013/12/04/102061.shtml>. Last accessed 19 September 2014.

¹⁴⁸ Раис Равкатович Сулейманов (2013). “КАРТ-БЛАНШ. Ваххабитский интернационал: сегодня Сирия, завтра Россия.” *Независимая газета* [online Russian language edition, 22 May 2013]. http://www.ng.ru/regions/2013-05-22/3_kartblansh.html. Last accessed 21 September 2014. Suleymanov is Director of the Volga Center for Regional and Ethno-Religious Studies of the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁰ “В Чечне задержан воевавший в Сирии местный житель.” *Русская Планета* [online Russian language edition, 15 April 2014]. <http://rusplt.ru/news/v-chechne-zaderjan-voevavshiy-v-sirii-mestnyi-jitel-120890.html>. Last accessed 22 September 2014.

¹⁵¹ “В Чечне будут судить бывшего участника ‘Свободной сирийской армии’.” *ITAR-TASS* [online Russian language edition, 15 August 2014]. <http://itar-tass.com/proisshestiya/1382868>. Last accessed 3 October 2014.

they fall short of Kadyrov's earlier pledge to kill any “Salafi terrorists” who returned to Chechnya from Syria, whom he called “devils.”¹⁵²

The Russian Government has used state-recognized Islamic organizations to establish informal lines of communication with Syrian Islamic leaders. Published reports state that Mufti Farid Salman Haidar, chairman of the Ulema Council of the Russian Association of Islamic Consent, in March 2013 met in Syria with Sheikh Ahmed Badreddin Hassoun, the Supreme Mufti of Syria to discuss the “promotion of traditional, anti-Wahhab Islam.”¹⁵³ Several months later, Salman publicly defended the Syrian government against accusations that it used chemical weapons.¹⁵⁴

TURKEY PLAYS THE CHECHEN CARD

Earlier this year, one analysis warned, “The arrival of the Chechens in Syria makes a joint anti-terrorism strategy with Turkey even more urgent, and forces Western states to cooperate with Russian security agencies.”¹⁵⁵ Turkey has a substantial Diaspora Chechen community, by most estimates, the largest outside Russia, concentrated mostly in Istanbul with smaller pockets in Adana, Maras, Mus and Sivas.

The now-defunct Turkish political magazine *Nokta* reported that some two thousand Turkish Chechens fought against Russia in the First Chechen War,¹⁵⁶ during which their most notable operation was the January 1996 seizure of the Russian ferry *Aurasia* (“Eurasia”) in the Turkish port city Trabzon. In 2000, Bulent Yildirim of Turkey's Islamist National Youth Foundation¹⁵⁷

¹⁵² The video of the 14 April 2013 interview broadcast on Sky News Arabia can be viewed here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Oe_hYEJIDg&feature=youtu.be&app=desktop.

¹⁵³ Роман Силантьев (2013). “Умма со смещенным центром.” *Независимая газета* [online Russian language edition, 29 June 2013]. http://www.ng.ru/ng_religii/2013-06-19/4_umma.html. Last accessed 21 September 2014. In an undated interview published on the website *islam.ru*, Salman discussed “the difference between Russian Muslim culture and Wahhabi culture.” [<http://islam.ru/en/content/story/farid-salman-what-difference-between-traditional-islam-and-salafiiyah>]

¹⁵⁴ “Syrian Opposition Behind Chemical Weapons Attacks – Mufti.” *RIA-Novosti* [online English language edition, 3 September 2013]. <http://en.ria.ru/world/20130903/183138681/Syrian-Opposition-Behind-Chemical-Weapons-Attacks---Mufti.html>. Last accessed 21 September 2014.

¹⁵⁵ Guido Steinberg (2014). “A Chechen al-Qaeda? Caucasian Groups Further Internationalize the Syrian Struggle.” *SWP Comments* 31. German Institute for International and Security Affairs (June 2014). http://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/comments/2014C31_sbg.pdf. Last accessed 22 September 2014.

¹⁵⁶ *Nokta* (1996). A weekly political news magazine, *Nokta* (“Dot”) published from 1983 until 2007 when it was closed under government pressure. It earlier elaborated on the role of Turkish mujahidin in the Balkans conflict: “On 26 February 1995, the Turkish magazine *Nokta* wrote about the participation of ‘Unit of the World Order’ members in the war in former Bosnia and Herzegovina. These members are mujahidin, but also members of the special task units of the Turkish police who spend their vacations or sick-leaves fighting in former Bosnia and Herzegovina.” For more, see: “Letter dated 21 December 1994 from the Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia addressed to the Special Rapporteur of the Commission on Human Rights on the question of the use of mercenaries.” United Nations General Assembly, Fiftieth Session, Item 106 of the provisional agenda. <http://www.un.org/documents/ga/docs/50/plenary/a50-390add1.htm>. Last accessed 22 September 2014.

¹⁵⁷ Turkey's National Youth Foundation [Turkish: *Millî Gençlik Vakfı* (MGV)] was a pro-Islamic association that reportedly functioned as the youth wing of Turkey's Virtue Party [Turkish: *Fazilet Partisi* (FP)], which was banned in 2001.

averred, “Turkish public opinion is very sympathetic to the Chechens. So the current government will have to change its policy, or the people will change the government.”¹⁵⁸ As late as 2003, a Turkish *jama'at* known by the Russian transliteration *Osmanly*¹⁵⁹ (“Ottoman”) was still active in Chechnya when its leader, identified as “Amir Muhtar,” was interviewed by the pro-jihadi website, *Kavkaz Center*.¹⁶⁰ Turkey continued to back the Chechen rebellion until 2004, and reportedly continues to provide sanctuary to numerous Chechen separatists.

By 2008, however, Turkey's approach to “playing the Chechen card” became more nuanced: according to one analysis, “There is no political freedom for Chechen refugees, no chances for any Chechen political tendency to organize itself if the Turkish control structures do not allow it.” The analysis continued:

“[I]t would be false to say that the moderate Islamist government of Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan has totally renounced his country's historical and geopolitical alliance with local Caucasian forces against Russia. Turkey is simply playing a two-level game. On the one hand, Turkey proves to Russia its good intentions by putting pressure on the Chechen Diaspora. On the other, it keeps open opportunities for Chechen resistance groups to act from its territory, for example, by collecting and transferring funds to the Chechen guerrillas. Using this strategy, Turkey retains a powerful tool in its ongoing negotiations with Russia on commercial and economic matters. Through the Chechen Diaspora, Ankara is able to obtain concessions from Moscow. Thus, the Turkish government is willing to sacrifice one part of the Chechen Diaspora and allow another part to prosper and act in the interests of the Chechen guerrillas. Erdogan's government needs the Chechens: it needs to keep them active, but not too active.”¹⁶¹

In June 2014, Turkey designated Jabhat al-Nusra a terrorist organization, an action described by one analyst as “further proof of Turkey’s failed Syria policy, which has left the government of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan little choice but to fall in line with the United States with regard to radical groups fighting in that country.”¹⁶² It was widely held in the region that Turkey was using Jabhat al-Nusra against Syrian groups aligned with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) to prevent the latter from taking control of territory along the Turkish-Syrian border after Syrian government forces withdrew.

¹⁵⁸ “Turkey succours wounded Chechens.” *BBC World Edition* [online edition, 2 February 2000]. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/628272.stm>. Last accessed 22 September 2014.

¹⁵⁹ Russian: Османлы.

¹⁶⁰ The Russian language *Kavkaz Center* published a 2003 interview with an individual identified as “Amir Muhtar, Chief of Turkish Jamaat ‘Osmanly’ fighting in Chechnya.” See: “Душа турка истосковалась по Исламу.” *Кавказ-центр* [online Russian language edition, 8 September 2003]. <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/russ/content/2003/02/08/3839.shtml>. Last accessed 22 September 2014.

¹⁶¹ Brody (2008), *op cit*.

¹⁶² Semih Idiz (2014). “Why is Jabhat al-Nusra no longer useful to Turkey?” *Al-Monitor Turkey Pulse* [online edition, 10 June 2014]. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/06/idiz-turkey-syria-opposition-nusra-terrorist-uncsc-erdogan.html>. Last accessed 22 September 2014.

The presence of Chechen jihadist groups in the al-Sham conflict represents a significant domestic security problem in Turkey. However, in a throwback to its past policy in the Chechen conflict, the Turkish government has tolerated their activities on Turkish territory, allowing them to use Turkey as a rear base and to receive support from Turkey's Chechen diaspora community without state interference. There also are reports that Turkey's National Intelligence Organization¹⁶³ has collaborated with Abu-Umar al-Shishani and Abu Musaaba, who at the time controlled some 100 Turkish-speaking Chechens.

This occurred as what is described as an "Uzbek-Turkish al-Qaeda"¹⁶⁴ took root in Turkey. The Turkish government has acted on the apparent belief that it can instrumentalize Chechen jihadist groups for its own purposes, such as toppling the Assad regime in Syria and suppressing Syrian Kurdish groups that are close to the PKK.¹⁶⁵ However, what distinguishes jihadists in the al-Sham conflict generally is their conviction that it is merely part of a larger struggle that will not end with the fall of Bashar al-Assad. Lest anyone miss the point, al-Zawahiri titled his February 2012 video address to the Syrian people "Go Forward O Lions of Syria."¹⁶⁶

Turkish security services intercept only a small fraction of those who use Turkey as a transit zone to reach Syria, either through omission or commission (or a combination of the two). The composition of those who do so changed in the past year, however: while in 2012-2013 the majority of Chechens transiting Turkey en route to Syria came from Europe, in 2014 most have come directly from the North Caucasus.¹⁶⁷ This shift led one analyst to conclude, "In a

¹⁶³ Turkish: *Milli İstihbarat Teşkilatı* (MİT). During the First Chechen War (1994-1996), Turkey hosted a number of exiled Chechen warlords, and allowed several Turkish mayors who were members of Turkey's Prosperity Party to provide medical aid and general support for the Chechen guerrillas. In the first two years of the Second Chechen War (1999-2008), an estimated three to four thousand Chechen refugees arrived in Turkey. Turkey allowed Chechens activists tightly-controlled safe haven until the September 2004 Beslan school siege, when a force controlled by the Chechen guerilla commander Shamil Basayev occupied a school in North Ossetia, ending with the death of 334 people including 154 children. In December 2004, a dozen Chechens were arrested by Turkish special forces and charged with maintaining ties to Islamist groups, in particular, al-Qa'ida. See: Marc Brody (2009). "The Chechen Diaspora in Turkey." *North Caucasus Analysis*. 6:7. http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=2169#.VBysoku4n8s. Last accessed 19 September 2014.

¹⁶⁴ Guido Steinberg (2006). "A Turkish al-Qaeda: The Islamic Jihad Union and the Internationalization of Uzbek Jihadism." *Strategic Insights*. VII:3. http://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/fachpublikationen/sbg_IJU_Strategic_Insights_ks.pdf. Last accessed 22 September 2014.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹⁶⁶ The transcript of the video message is available at: <http://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2012/02/dr-ayman-al-e1ba93awc481hirc4ab-22onward-oh-lions-of-syria22-en.pdf>. Last accessed 22 September 2014.

¹⁶⁷ This in part reflects improved interdiction by European countries; for example, Austria's arrest in August 2014 of nine Russian nationals "suspected of intending to join Islamist militants in Syria." See: "В Австрии арестованы 9 чеченцев, направлявшихся на джихад в Сирию." *МК.ru* [online Russian language edition, 21 August 2014]. <http://www.mk.ru/incident/2014/08/21/v-avstrii-arestovany-9-chechencev-napravlyavshikhsya-na-dzhikhad-v-siriyu.html>. Last accessed 22 September 2014.

major turnaround, Chechen groups in the Middle East are now replenished by Russian Chechens rather than European Chechens.”¹⁶⁸

There are reports of a Turkish *jama'at*¹⁶⁹ within Jabhat al-Nusra comprised of Turkish Chechens and reportedly led by "Seyfullakh Shishani."¹⁷⁰ One Turkish-language video message purportedly posted by Seyfullakh Shishani calls on Chechens in Turkey to support fighters in al-Sham;¹⁷¹ in another, an individual identified as “Khalid Shishani” explains in Russian why the *jama'at* aligned with Jabhat al-Nusra against Dā‘ish.¹⁷²

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Respected North Caucasus analyst Uwe Halbach last year said the region was still an “epicenter of Islamism” but no longer “the epicenter of violence and revolution.”¹⁷³ Perhaps like the Shishan a century ago,¹⁷⁴ the epicenter of Chechen violence and revolution has gone to al-Sham. Many believe it has: several days ago, *Al-Jazeera* declared that Chechens now lead the way in the war for dominance in Syria.¹⁷⁵ While few *jama'ats* in al-Sham are exclusively Chechen, for those in which they predominate, the name “*Chechen* or *Shishani* has been turned into a ‘brand’.”¹⁷⁶

¹⁶⁸ Mairbek Vatchagaev (2014). "Recruits From Chechnya and Central Asia Bolster Ranks of Islamic State." *Eurasia Daily Monitor* [online edition, 4 September 2014]. 11:154.

http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Bsword%5D=8fd5893941d69d0be3f378576261ae3e&tx_ttnews%5Bany_of_the_words%5D=chchen%20diaspora%20turkey&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=42785&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=7&cHash=3c47ce03008b09157f414369c2fa75ca#.VCA7WUu4n8s. Last accessed 22 September 2014.

¹⁶⁹ This group is not the same one also referred to as "the Turkish Jamaat" and comprised of Islamist militants from eastern Turkey who sought refuge in North Waziristan. See: <http://defence.pk/threads/afghan-endgame-us-withdraws-military-equipment-via-pakistan.234290/page-3#ixzz3E40WuijH>

¹⁷⁰ This is not the same Sayfullakh Shishani *aka* Ruslan Machalikashvili.

¹⁷¹ See for example: "Seyfullah Çeçen Cemaati Emirleri Ebu Muhammed ve Ebu Hafsa dan Mesaj" [video posted 4 August 2014]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QajpjKvS8A0>. Last accessed 22 September 2014.

¹⁷² "Разъяснение относительно фитны в Шаме" ["Clarification regarding the *fitnah* in the Sham"]. Online video posted 10 September 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xQWPa7XTPiU>. Last accessed 22 September 2014. The Arabic transliteration *fitnah* in this context means discord.

¹⁷³ "Halbach: 'Nordkaukasus ein Epizentrum des Islamismus'." (2014). *Deutsche Welle* [online German language edition]. <http://www.dw.de/halbach-nordkaukasus-ein-epizentrum-des-islamismus/a-16758535>. Last accessed 15 October 2014. Halbach is part of the research group on Eastern Europe and Eurasia at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (*Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik*) in Berlin.

¹⁷⁴ And contemporary Chechens, too: massive and repeated displacement and exile abroad have been among the most dramatic and historic consequences of the wars in Chechnya. See: Harald Glode (2012). *Report about Chechen Refugees in Turkey and Georgia*. Borderline-Europe. http://www.borderline-europe.de/downloads/2012_Bericht_ueber_tschetschnische_Fluechtlinge_in_der_Tuerkei_und_Georgien.pdf. Last accessed 15 October 2014. Borderline-Europe is a Berlin-based NGO that monitors human rights at the European Union's external borders.

¹⁷⁵ John Batchelor (2014). "Chechens lead way for ISIL war for dominance. *Al-Jazeera* [online English language edition, 13 October 2014]. <http://america.aljazeera.com/opinions/2014/10/isil-chechens-islamicstaterussiaturkeykobane.html>. Last accessed 15 October 2014.

¹⁷⁶ Joanna Parasczuk (2014). "What Are the 'Chechen Jamaats' in the Islamic State?" *From Chechnya to Syria* [online edition, 11 October 2014]. <http://www.chechensinsyria.com>. Last accessed 15 October 2014.

It is unlikely that the prospect of a violent end will dissuade Chechen *muwahhidun* or jihadis to leave al-Sham or to stay away in the first place: a traditional Chechen proverb says, “He who thinks about consequences cannot be brave.”¹⁷⁷ And Russia's murderous, decade-long effort to decapitate the ranks of Chechen expatriate leaders failed despite its lethality.¹⁷⁸ It would be a critical judgment error to think Chechen *jama'ats* battling in al-Sham would be any less determined.

Transfection of North Caucasus Diaspora populations throughout the region by the Chechen-Shishani brand would risk further (conceivably calamitous) destabilization over a broader geography. One especially troubling scenario would see Dā'ish launch a concerted offensive northward to realize al-Sham's territorial ambitions within Turkey — where by one estimate 5 million ethnic Caucasians live — in an area coterminous with Turkey's entire Southeastern Anatolia Region. The same might be said, too, for Jordan, though in a somewhat different context: its Joint Special Operations Command is located in Zarqa about 30km north of Amman.¹⁷⁹ There, the King Abdullah II Special Operations Training Center¹⁸⁰ (KASOTC) is a critical venue where Jordan's Counter-Terrorism Battalion 71 [CTB-71] trains irregular and special operations forces for the region.¹⁸¹ While Jordan's Shishan appear on the surface less

¹⁷⁷ Chechen: Тлаьхъене ладийгlinчух кьонах ца хилла. Chechen transl.: *Tlaikhiyenye ladiiglinchukh kionakh tsa khilla*.

¹⁷⁸ The German broadcaster Deutsche Welle reported in May that “Turkish prosecutors suspect that the murders of four Chechen activists in Istanbul between 2009 and 2011 were ordered by the Russian intelligence service.” Some investigators suspected these operations were conducted from Berlin. [<http://www.dw.de/was-russia-behind-chechen-murders-in-turkey/a-17477421>] In 2004, a court in the Gulf State of Qatar sentenced two Russian agents to life imprisonment for the murder there of the former Chechen leader Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev.

¹⁷⁹ Zarqa is allocated one of three designated Circassian-Chechen seats in Jordan's parliament.

¹⁸⁰ KASOTC opened on 19 May 2009. It consists of simulated urban and outdoor facilities located near Yajooz and Zarqa, and a separate maritime security training facility in Aqabah,

¹⁸¹ Founded in the aftermath of Jordan's “Black September,” Counter-Terrorism Battalion 71 [CTB-71] is comprised of some 100 Jordanian special force operators and part of Jordan's Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC). CTB-71's mission is to respond to terrorist or hostage-taking incidents inside Jordan and beyond; and to train foreign counter-insurgency forces, particularly those facing threats in the Middle East.

A secret memorandum prepared after a 28 February 2006 meeting between United States Ambassador Henry A. Crumpton, the United States State Department's Coordinator for Counterterrorism, and one “Lt. Col. Adnan” [author's note: the reference is to Lt. Col. Adnan al-Abbadi, who also ran KASOTC] the “commander of the 71st Jordanian Counterterrorism Battalion” concluded with the assessment of an unnamed member of the United States Defense Attaché in Amman that “Jordanian SOCOM and the 71st CT Battalion [are] incapable of extended external operations without significant U.S. logistical support and augmentation.” [“Ambassador Crumpton's Visit to Jordan's 71st Counterterrorism Battalion. SECRET.” Memorandum dated 2 March 2006. Cable 06AMMAN1511a. https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06AMMAN1511_a.html. Last accessed 20 September 2014.]

The message was not lost on Jordanian commanders. In June 2014, Jordanian SOFs successfully repelled a Dā'ish force, entering Iraq to do so reportedly without the assistance of CENTCOM Forward-Jordan. For reference, CENTCOM Forward-Jordan [formally, “United States Central Command (Forward)- Jordan” or CF-J] is a forward-deployed command element operating from KASOTC to support military assistance efforts in Jordan, broadly defined. Some 1,000 United States military personnel are assigned to CF-J, along with an F-16 squadron and several Patriot anti-missile batteries deployed along the Jordanian-Syrian border. It has three main command sections. The first is a United States Air Force command section that coordinates with Israeli, Jordanian, Saudi and other regional air force commands. A second coordinates ground operations between United States and Jordanian SOFs, and between these forces and Iraqi and Syrian paramilitary forces. The third

restive than other ethnic Caucasians in the region, the risk posed by the longstanding Jordanian-Chechen nexus is not lost on Jordanian security officials.

It has served understandable Russian short-term security interests to see Chechen *muwahhidun* and jihadis migrate to al-Sham from the North Caucasus, and once there, to be contained in one sense or another until such time as they were consumed in the conflict. Events have overtaken this rump doctrine, however, as the anti-Assad insurgency embodied by the al-Qa'ida-linked Jabhat al-Nusra and its rival, Islamic State/Dā'ish, have successfully widened the conflict geographically, and gained at least an argued advantage in the battlespace. Russia's paramount interest now is to ensure that Chechen *muwahhidun* and jihadis do not flow back to whence they came. Here, it seems at least, Russian and Western interests are coaligned.

Assessing Russia's containment strategy in the North Caucasus, it employed a studied porosity to allow Chechen insurgents to "leak" out of region (and out of Russia) as a means of lessening its acuity within. This also served a larger end of tolerating a chronic, low-grade insurgency as an alternative to an acute one (and in lieu of an end to it). While the United States can tolerate no such leakage — its occurrence would be especially destabilizing for Turkey and Jordan — it can focus on deescalating the conflict from its current acute state to a lower intensity albeit chronic one. It is inarguable from Russia's experience that the Chechen-led insurgency will end anytime soon. Another takeaway is that a war of attrition only favors the larger force — undeniably here, the United States — if it commits to a persistent, implacable application of lethal force.

is a United States Central Intelligence Agency Special Activities Division command section, the Ground Branch of which engages covertly in tactical operations with paramilitary forces inside Syria.



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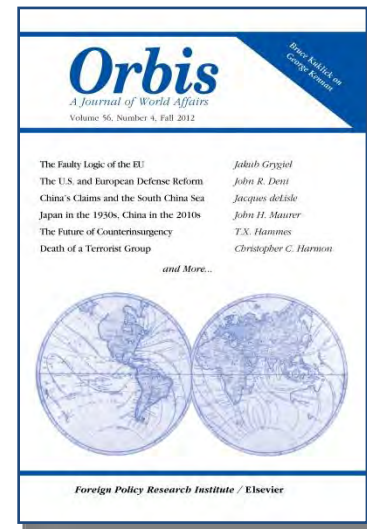
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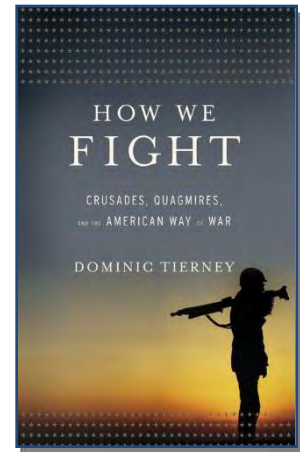
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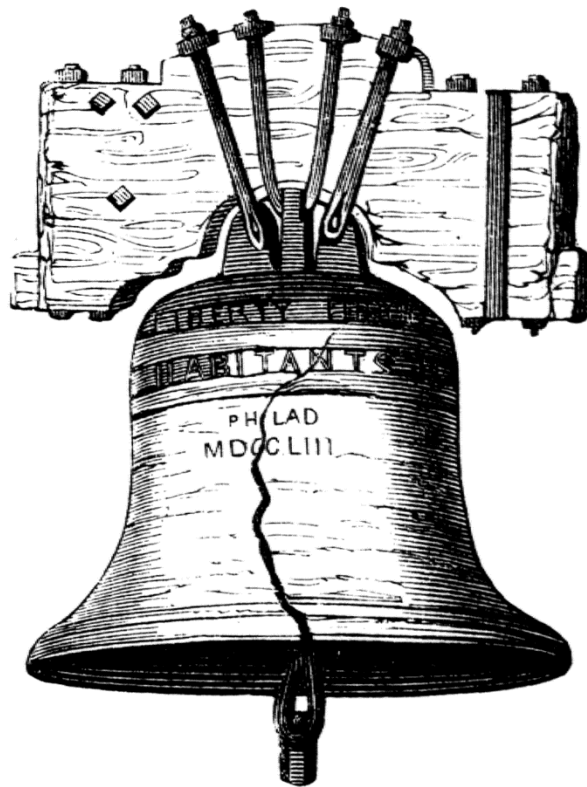
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