Chapter 4

ISLAMIC MILITANCY IN RUSSIA 1997-1999

The Khasavayurt Accords ceased hostility in Chechnya between Russian troops and Chechens. However it was not a document that could bring lasting peace to Chechnya mainly because of the problems existing in its structure as discussed previously. More importantly though it was the lawlessness and criminality, which continued to exist in Chechnya and the Chechen insistence on complete sovereignty and independence that was responsible for continued friction between Chechnya and Russia. This was to be seen in the writ of Chechen warlords and gang leaders running large. They indulged in smuggling of narcotics, abduction of Russians, members of the international community (such as journalists, aid workers) and prosperous people of the region. These highly profitable abductions and regular terror attacks have occurred since
August 1996¹. Portions of the Chechen line were seriously damaged during the previous Russo-Chechen war, neither the peace agreement in 1996 nor the repair of the damage eliminated the threats to the integrity of the Baku Grozny Novorossysk BGN pipeline. Fires and explosions triggered by ‘backyard refiners’ who tapped the pipeline almost at will frequently interrupted the oil flow. The thefts were so large that the line was closed down in the fall 1996, illegal tapping of the line continued after its opening in November 1997 for the next 18 months and became notable in 1999 when the line was idle 95 of the first 180 days. Transneft, the oil company in charge of the pipeline, charged that upon entry into the territory of Chechnya there is oil in the pipeline however upon the exit from Chechnya there is no oil in the pipeline.² Oil theft was hardly the only symptom of lawlessness in the region. This wanton criminality in Chechnya was accompanied by the

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gradual change in the attitude and orientation of at least some segments of its population.

The people of North Caucasus have been believers in Sufi form of Islam. As has been discussed Sufism is not fundamentalist rather moderate and lenient and it had been suppressed during the Tsarist and Soviet period. The above mentioned change primarily occurred due to the entry of radical Islamist or Islamic fundamentalists and these groups were hostile to the Sufis as well. The Russians however understand these Islamic fundamentalists as ‘Wahabbis’ Wahabbism is an Islamic puritan movement that emerged in the early 18th century and was adopted by the Saudi ruling family in 1744. It will not be far fetched to call it fundamentalist in the true sense of the word as it calls for a rigid monotheism, return to the original teaching of the Quran and Mohammad and opposes changes in Islamic doctrine. More importantly it seeks to remove paganism from Islam. In the North Caucasus this pagan element exists, as here the pre Islamic belief still exist. It is still the version of Islam embraced by the Saudi royal family. It is now widespread not
only in the Arabian Peninsula but also increasingly in other areas such as Pakistan.³ For the Russians however Wahabbism is the name of any kind of politicised Islam, which demands a separate homeland for Muslims. There has been great paranoia in Russia and even in the west about Wahabbism. As a result the term Wahabbism has been overused and abused by government officials and the media in Russia. They tend to blame all unrest in the region on this order⁴. But Wahabbism is one amongst the many radical Islamist movements, which have entered Russia. Regardless of the banner, however, it is true that radical Islam has made inroads in some sections of the population in Southern Russia, mainly in Chechnya and Dagestan.

Radical Islamists first got a foothold in Russia when during the close of the Soviet era the iron curtain got lifted and there was resumption of contacts between Soviet Muslims and the Muslims abroad, mainly through the Hajj pilgrimages. It

was not that the governments of Saudi Arabia or other Arab regimes were spreading Islamic fundamentalism, for they had terrorist threats of their own. There were some Saudi individuals however who contributed funds for the construction of mosques, and *Hajj* pilgrimages. In this regard the watershed was the Russo-Chechen war of 1994-96. During that period, Islam had provided spiritual support to fighters facing militarily superior (at least on paper) Russian forces. There was an increase in reliance on Islam in maintaining discipline and enforcing orders. The rise of radical Islam thus has a beginning in this war. The phenomenon of Islamic fundamentalism was accompanied by a rise of Islamic militancy in Chechnya and other parts of the North Caucasus. The militants are of various nationalities that have taken refuge in North Caucasus particularly in Chechnya. There are fundamentalist militants from Pakistan, Egypt, Jordan and

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5 P.L. Dash, "Chechnya War has No End", *Economic and Political Weekly*, April 29, 2000, pp.1517
Saudi Arabia fighting along side the Chechens against the Russians. These militants are the veterans of Chechen, Abkhaz and Afghan conflicts.\(^7\) It can be thus said that the demons of the past are now coming to haunt the North Caucasian region. North Caucasus especially Chechnya became a safe haven for such elements, due to the breakdown of government there. These militants are in the possession of sophisticated weapons they are also knowledgeable about terror tactics, bomb making and the use of biological weapons.\(^8\) They have carried a series of terrorist attacks in Russia.\(^9\) The call of fundamentalist Islam, which includes Wahabbism, was greatest amongst these militants, as they had no employment opportunity. They possessed few skills beyond war fighting and few other career options in these impoverished lands. Islam provided a cause to sustain their fight - and more fighting produces more

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\(^7\) P.L. Dash, No.5, pp..1517


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generations of people uprooted from their homes and professions. The categorical moral purity of the Islamic message also appealed to those disillusioned with corruption and poverty plaguing the former Soviet Republics. Their only job was to continue the armed struggle whether it was against the Russians, the traditional religious elite, political moderates or occupiers of traditional Chechen land.

An unfortunate fallout of the rise of Islamic militancy and fundamentalism was that the Chechen President Maskhadov (a former Soviet army officer and known moderate till then) under pressure from these elements declared the transformation of the Chechen Republic formally into an Islamic state and Chechnya which had been named as Republic of Ichkeria in 1992 was renamed as the Islamic Republic of Ichkeria. 10 In 1997, the Chechen government announced a ban on alcohol sales, introduced Islamic law Sharia, established Sharia courts and two public executions

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were carried according to it. In September the same year four convicted criminals were again executed by a firing squad. These executions along with Chechen governments plans to issue its own passports created another row with Russia as Russia had signed the OSCE guidelines to end capital punishments in its territory and these executions were violations of Russian law. Chechen officials however claimed that the punishment was in accordance with Islamic law. In spite of this people have remained secular Islamic fundamentalism has made an impact only in certain sections of the population such as the militant youths as discussed above. A reason for this has been that in the North Caucasus Islamic fundamentalism is greatly opposed by the Sufis and the traditional clergy. They see it as a threat to their influence and position. The Islamic radicals are seen as Arab sympathizers who are introducing a militant and fundamentalist brand of Islam into the region. It is alien to the traditional forms of

11 Edward W. Walker, no. 3, pp. 17
Islam i.e. Sufism which follows moderate Islamic practices. More importantly it hurts the traditional Sufi loyalties of the Chechen people as Wahabbism considers Sufism particularly the veneration of Sufi masters and the pilgrimages to their *mazaars* as un-Islamic. The fact that Chechens had voted for moderate and secular Maskhadov over his more radical rival\textsuperscript{13} and before him they had accepted Dudaev as their leader who was also not a fundamentalist is a proof that people preferred secularism, internal order and moderate Sufism to fundamentalist Islam.

**The Pan-Islamic Dimension Of Militancy In North Caucasus**

While in the Russo-Chechen war Chechen alone were involved by the time of the second Russian campaign in Dagestan and Chechnya there was evidence of Islamic militancy having linkages across international borders. Thus well-trained international force was waging the war which

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\textsuperscript{13} 'Turnout heavy as Chechens pick a president', Web posted at 8:00 p.m. EST. January 27, 1997(visited on November 6, 2000)<www.CNN.com/world/970127/chechnya.vote>.
unfolded in Russia's Dagestan province. Far from being a rag tag group, the insurgents were a multi-national force disciplined and well armed. According to the words of Shamyl Basayev himself the insurgents in Dagestan were an international corps comprising Chechen, Dagestani and other nationals. According to him 'in the Botlikh operation:' five of his men which included 14 Chechens, 8 Dagestani, 5 Arabs, 3 Turks, 2 Uzbeks, 2 Ingush, were killed.'14 Shamyl Basayev was the principal field commander and who was commander of Chechen forces during the Russo-Chechen war of 1994-1996. There has also been a flow of *Mujahidin* or Islamic warriors from Afghanistan and Pakistan, Bosnia, Middle East, Egypt and Sudan. The well-armed fighters had been trained months ago at secret bases in Chechnya and other Muslim countries of Pakistan, Sudan, and Afghanistan. Shamyl Basayev himself had visited Pakistan and Afghanistan twice before the conflict in Dagestan to inspect and modify the training programmes provided to his people. By 1997, several

14 "EXCLUSIVE : Interview with Shamyl Basayev" (visited on November 7, 2000), <www.muslimmag.org/webversion/caucasus/basayev_interview.html>
15 P L Dash, No.5 ,pp.1517
hundreds of Chechen were being trained in ISI sponsored camps near Warsaj (Takhar), Jabal ol-Saraj (Parwan), Khowst (Paktia), and other smaller sites. Some 250 Chechens were undergoing clandestine training in a camp near Peshawar by ISI operatives and expert terrorists from Egypt and Sudan. Some 100 Chechens were being trained by the ISI in the Lahore area, in sophisticated terrorism and urban warfare. Some Chechen militants received an year’s training of Quranic teaching and thereafter were sent to face Russians in Chechnya in the training camp at Akora, Khattak in Pakistan. Some 70 militants from Pakistan were sent to Chechnya in the year 2000. In the same year in February, Zelim Khan Yander Bayev visited Pakistan, he received $200,000 from Qazi Hussain Ahmed of Jamat-e-Islami. Several hundred 'Mujahidin', mainly Afghans and Chechens were also being trained by the HizbAllah in Sudan. In Afghanistan Mohammed Ali Akhund organised a Taliban
force for deployment in Chechnya. Most important were the Islamic commanders from Afghanistan, Pakistan and other Arab states. They were all veterans of Afghan, Balkan and Chechen conflicts, who built a new generation of Chechen 'Mujahidin'. They also constituted the core of the elite terrorists and the special operations unit of the Chechens. They trained cadres from other Caucasian states and nationalities. The aim of the countries, which supported Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism, was that the region right from Afghanistan to Caucasus could come under their influence. The specifics of the impending escalation in Chechnya were decided in the summit of the senior commanders of the HizbAllah international, which had been held in Mogadishu, Somalia. Among the participants were also Osama Bin Laden, the Commander of the Al-Qaeda Forces based in Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia, and Yemen. The summit decided to deploy between 500 to 700 Mujahidin, which included Arabs, Pakistanis, Afghans, etc. to Chechnya. These Mujahidin came from camps in Afghanistan which were being run by ISI under the normal supervision of Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, as well as from
camps in Sudan and Lebanon. This international force of Islamic militants were the combination of the trained Chechen HizbAllah, and HizbAllah veterans from Persian Gulf states and Bosnia. The ISI was also directly responsible for the transportation, logistics and the transfer of weapons to Chechnya. The in charge of the Pakistani part of the operation was General Asharaf of the ISI. He was the head of the ISI branch in charge of support for Islamist causes and he also, met Basayev in 1994. Shamyl Basayev had visited Afghanistan in 1994 via Baku in Azerbaijan and Pakistan. Additional funds were also moved to Chechnya from Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf via Western Europe although Shamyl Basayev has denied this. Follow up decisions on the accelerated implementation of these designs were reached in the follow up summit of the commanders of the HizbAllah International that was also held in Mogadishu, Somalia. The implementation of these plans almost began immediately; by

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19 Yossuf Bodansky, no.8
21 Yossef Bodansky, no. 8
22 “EXCLUSIVE : Interview with Shamyl Basayev”, no. 14
October 1996 at least 200 Mujahidin were already sent to Chechnya from camps in Pakistan and Afghanistan. The Pakistani minister of interior, Major General (Retired) Naseerullah Khan Babar, personally arranged for the safe conduct of these insurgents through both the Taliban and Ahmad Shah Masood lines, as part of the Pakistani mediation effort in Afghanistan. From Northeastern Afghanistan these militants were transported eastward on the supply route, which had been established for the Afghan Mujahidins during the Soviet-Afghan war of the 1980s. They were then taken to camps near Chitral. From there were flown to Chechnya from a nearby airport already used by the ISI for traffic in and out of the Commonwealth of Independent States. About 100 mujahidins from the Arab countries also reached Chechnya from bases in Sudan and Yemen. These Mujahidin reached Chechnya via Iran and Afghanistan and Azerbaizan, Further Chechen Mujahidin trained in November 1996 in Pasdaran and Bqaa in camps run by HizbAllah. 23 According to some reports there could also be a role of fugitive Saudi millionaire,
Osama Bin Laden who may have financed these militants. As Osama Bin Laden has often expressed his desire to see Islam supreme in the World and to end what he calls Western and other countries' oppression of the Muslims. Bin Laden, has been accused by the US of orchestrating the US Embassy Bombings in Kenya and Tanzania. To achieve his motive he believes in terrorist methods. In Chechnya Bin Laden communicated through his secret emissaries to arrange financing, training and arms shipment to the region. He may have used clandestine e-mail network to finance these activities. He also may have made a week long visit to the village of Serzhen-Yurt in Chechnya shortly before the rebels crossed into Dagestan.\textsuperscript{24} Other outsiders who had a role in the region were Husan al-Turabi, leader of Sudan's National Islamic Front and Ameer Khattab who was perhaps a Jordanian. In Chechnya numerous Mujahidin commanders who belonged to other Muslim countries were now serving as assistants and aides to key Chechen commanders. Ameer Khattab was one of them, who was working with Shamyl.

\textsuperscript{24}Ibid.
Basayev. Prior to his arrival in Chechnya, he had fought in Afghanistan and in several Persian Gulf countries. He also claims to have personally conducted a number of terrorist strikes against Israeli and French citizens. In Chechnya, Khattab established an elite force of veteran Mujahidin and Islamist Chechen that played a central role in some of the more demanding battles and terrorist strikes. He was a revered commander, considered harsh, but caring and fair. A specialist in sabotage and subversive activity, Khattab was in command of the special forces that destroyed a Russian armoured convoy near the village of Serzhen-Yurt and Yarysh-Mardy in the Spring of 1996. In 1997 Khattab converted to peacetime operations. He established terrorists-commando training schools near the village of Serzhen-Yurt, Vedeno Rayon, where he and several of his senior veteran Afghan and Bosnian Mujahidin serve as instructors.

Thus after the end of 1994-96 conflict in Chechnya, the region fast deteriorated into an area infested with anarchy,
criminality and militancy. The fundamentalist brand of Islam took roots in Chechnya and the emissaries of this fundamentalist Islamic militancy indulged in kidnapping, extortion and violence. The important feature of this period was thus emergence of Islamic fundamentalism and the change in nature of militancy. Islamic fundamentalism abettes militancy as it is intolerance and unaccomodative. There was a nexus which emerged between miltants of Chechnya and those of other Muslim nation. The Pan Islamic dimension of militancy was thus introduced in Chechnya. It was against this background that Chechen militants decided to interfere in Dagestan. They wished to take advantage of disturbance in some of its areas. Their motive was to spread their control to other areas of the Caucasus.