

Exclusion and Inclusion: The Core of Chechen Mobilization to Jihad

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Abstract

The article explores the broad social and relational drivers behind mobilization of Chechens into armed jihad in the Levant. It suggests that the core mobilizing tool in a process toward violent (re-)action is a narrative that projects the Other as so different from, and so dangerous to the Self that the use of violence is legitimized. Moreover, the shift to more radical representations of the other group occurs in a mutual pattern of imagining and interaction between groups. The mobilization of Chechens into armed jihad is explained with reference to the physical and social exclusion of Chechens in Russia and how these experiences have been interpreted and narrated on the one hand and the attempted inclusion of Chechnya/North Caucasus by the global jihadi milieu on the other hand.

Keywords: Chechnya, Russia, war, jihad, violent mobilization, Self/Other narratives

Introduction

Although the ranks of the insurgency in the North Caucasus have been drastically reduced in recent years and terrorist acts against the Kadyrov regime in Chechnya are rare, sizeable numbers of Chechens and other North Caucasians have left to fight jihad in Syria and Iraq from 2012 onwards. According to President Putin, 4,000 Russian citizens were fighting in Syria/Iraq in 2015; other Russian officials indicated that there were 2,200 Chechens in Syria in June 2015.[1] Barrett reported that there were 3,417 Russians in IS in October 2017, most of them from Chechnya and Dagestan.[2]

This article explores the broad social and relational drivers behind the mobilization of Chechens into armed jihad. The dire socio-economic conditions, weak rule of law and illegitimate authority in the North Caucasus are all likely to create a fertile ground for such mobilization.[3] Individual conditions and circumstances as well as cynical tactics on the part of the Russian government are also part of the picture. In this article, however, the author assumes that the core impetus behind Chechen mobilization springs from the post-Soviet wars (1994–1996 and 1999–2002) and is to be found in the domain of collective identification. It is argued that the much-discussed phenomenon of radicalization, here understood as mobilization for violent action, is a social, relational process in which escalating *narratives* of Self and Other are central. Such narratives stipulate paths for legitimate practices and actions within a group, also acquiring relevance through resonance with *experiences* of the past and how these are re-articulated in the group. Radicalization processes can be understood in the context of relational exclusion from one social group and the repeated narration of such exclusion on the one hand, and relational inclusion in another group on the other hand.

A set of narratives propagating armed resistance has emerged in response to the high levels of violence that Chechen society has been subjected to, and enmeshed in, during the past two decades. The narrative of Self and Other inherent in the discourse of, for example, Islamic State fits well with some of these narratives and can serve as an effective tool for mobilization if handled by skillful social entrepreneurs. Moreover, Chechen society has various *socio-cultural codes* that have been re-invented and reinforced with the wars, accentuating collective, radical narratives of Self and Other. Thus, jihadism along the lines of Islamic State may simply have appeared as the best-suited, most potent narrative for mobilization and resistance among young people from this region at this time.

This article weighs in on the side of explanations of radicalization and terrorism that look beyond the individual and the close-knit group level to the broader social processes that facilitate mobilization to violent action within larger social collectives. It is held that there is a connection between processes of radicalization in small

social units such as insurgent or terrorist groups, and the broader relational processes involving much larger social units such as ethnic groups, religions or states. This article aims to make two contributions to existing knowledge. First, it seeks to provide additional evidence of the othering mechanism in processes of violent mobilization by investigating a case where radical representations of Self and Other have been particularly evident.[4] This article does not only focus on the Chechen experience and discourse on their historical foe, Russia, but also on the recent Russian experience with, and representations of, Chechnya, which during the second Chechen war contained radical juxtapositions of Russia vs. Chechnya/Chechens as ‘terrorism’.[5] Second, it explores not only how processes of exclusion by, and othering of, one social group enables violent action, but also how inclusion by, and close identification with, another group contributes to make such violent action appear necessary. By engaging the Janus-faced propositions of the social identification perspective, namely that social groups do not only identify Others but also Selves and that the boundaries of such identifications are malleable, the author aims to expand the use of this perspective for explaining violent mobilization.[6]

The explanation of Chechen mobilization into jihad in the Levant offered in this article is by no means complete. For example, it does not incorporate the leadership/entrepreneurial level and can therefore not explain an entire movement. Rather, it wishes to highlight the collective social and cultural terrain available to a leadership seeking mobilization. Thus, this article complements rather than competes with Youngman’s contribution to this Special Issue, which addresses the ideology of the leadership level of the Caucasus Emirate (IK) and Sagramoso and Yarlykapov’s contribution which describes ISIS narrative and propaganda efforts in the North Caucasus.[7] Overall, the article is—although presenting quite detailed empirics on the social conditions and narratives of Chechen insurgents and foreign fighters—primarily offering a theoretical contribution to a field which has been characterized as ‘analytically barren’.[8]

The article opens by theorizing radicalization as a relational social process, presenting an explanation of Chechen violent mobilization that builds on general as well as culture-specific assumptions. It seeks to offer an explanation both in relation to the literature on terrorism and radicalization more generally and to the literature on the Chechen/North Caucasian insurgency. In the third section, the author draws Chechen experiences of social exclusion and inclusion, as well as the socio-cultural codes that help to solidify and spread narratives about this experience, into the explanation of Chechen mobilization to violent action. The fourth section offers an analysis of texts from Chechen fighters who travelled from Russia and the Pankisi Gorge in Georgia to the Levant. Here the representations of Self and Other in these texts are explained and the reasons given for joining the armed fight in a region that lies far from home are presented. This is an attempt at empirically validating core claims in this article, showing how the narratives of these fighters draw on the specific Chechen experience of exclusion but also incorporate new elements that are shared with other Islamists fighting in the Levant.

Concepts, Theoretical Approach and Explanation

In this article, the concept of *radicalization* is specifically applied in the sense of *mobilization for violent action*. [9] As several scholars have pointed out, the term “radicalized” blurs the distinction between ideas/beliefs and behavior in a problematic way.[10] Conceptualizing radicalization as mobilization for violent action and situating it within a discourse-theoretic understanding makes it possible to distinguish between narratives (ideas) and actual behavior, and also helps to clarify the link between them.

Mobilization for violent action occurs through an escalation in representations of Self and Other on a scale of difference and danger, to the point where violent means appear justified and legitimized—to fight the Other and secure the Self.[11] Representations within a collective narrative of Self and Other, on which all social units are based, are seen as stipulating paths for legitimate behavior.[12] Thus, the more different from, and dangerous to, your own group the representations of the other group are, the more legitimate and logical will it seem to undertake violent action against that group.[13] But there is no *necessary* link between identifications/narratives and behavior. Although most of the literature tacitly understands radicalization as a *process* moving individuals or groups into violent action, little is said about how to identify when a social group has reached the level of being *radicalized*. [14] However, by conceptualizing radicalization as mobilization for violent action

and constructing it as a discursive, relational process, one can identify a threshold for when a social group has reached this critical stage: it is when violent action has become legitimized in the collective narrative of Self and Other, creating conditions of possibility and legitimacy for violent action against the Other.

This conceptualization is premised on the understanding that when people are mobilized to violent action, this entails invoking the group as a collective social unit. Thus, in relation to the large body of literature on jihadism and terrorism, this article can be firmly placed on the side of collective (not individual) explanations. [15] Within the new wave of scholarship triggered by the 9/11 events that utilizes primarily collective explanations, considerable attention has been accorded to the group process within tightly knit jihadi networks of limited numbers with an eye on how to prevent terrorist acts.[16] While this focus is merited given the urgent threat that terrorist networks have posed in the past 20 years, it is also problematic. Such a narrow actor focus decontextualizes a phenomenon which cannot be properly understood outside the broader social dynamics *between* Islam and the West or Russia and Chechnya. In the social world, action is always in part re-action, at least as seen from the side of a given actor. Explaining the Chechen terrorism during the second Chechen war with reference to terrorist networks and their inner workings alone, as Russian authorities have sought to, is deeply unjust and has had tragic consequences for many people identified as Chechens. Therefore, this article moves beyond the narrow focus on tightly knit networks and for this reason does not provide much “inside information” on Chechen networks.

Rather, it aligns with the substantial literature on how structural ‘root causes,’ ‘situational variables’ or, more specifically, ‘grievances’ explain terrorism.[17] This author seeks to create an explanation that incorporates such structural factors but at the same time gives them only a secondary status.[18] Structural ‘root causes’ such as poor socio-economic condition, lack of civil and political liberties or repression matter for violent mobilization when they are mobilized into radically juxtaposed Self/Other narratives.[19] This article shows how the broader, but still specific, social conditions under which Chechens have lived in Russia are reflected in collective identifications of Self and Other, thereby facilitating the mobilization of some individuals into armed jihad.[20]

It is necessary to stress that in the explanation of Chechen mobilization suggested below, the “Chechen experiences,” “narratives,” and “socio-cultural codes” are all conceived of as collective, social, and contingent phenomena. They are potential common references and resources for all those who identify themselves as “Chechen,” but the content changes over time and there is no automatic attachment to, and use of, these resources on the part of individual Chechens.

Chechen Mobilization to Violence

The explanation offered here posits that there is a link between the Chechen experience of exclusion (verbal and physical) during and after the two recent wars with Russia (1994–1996 and 1999–2002) and the ideological changes in the movements that sought to organize violent resistance. The insurgency which grew out of the Chechen separatist movement slid from a national-separatist ideology institutionalized in the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria (ChRI), to the national-jihadist ideology eventually institutionalized in the IK in 2007, and then from this rather locally and nationally anchored jihad to a jihadist ideology focused more on transnational unity and the utopian idea of the Caliphate as being realized in IS.[21] This latter development took place after 2012 and was connected to the split in the insurgency.[22]

A large body of literature addresses these ideological developments within the North Caucasian insurgency, but these are often presented as occurring in a relational vacuum. If more radical references (starker juxtaposition between Self and Other, violence as legitimate strategy) are incorporated into the ideology, this is often explained by weakness within the insurgency itself, a need to replenish the ranks, or as a way of copying trends underway in the transnational jihadist milieu.[23] In accounts that do emphasize a link between repression and violent mobilization in the North Caucasus, this link is seldom theorized.[24]

The explanation in this article builds on the premise that violent mobilization is a *relational* phenomenon, in a double way: first, as noted, in the sense that such mobilization within a group hinges on radical narratives of Self and Other that serve to legitimize the use of violence; second, in the sense that ideological shifts, the transfer to more radical representations of the other group, occur in a mutual pattern of imagining and interaction *between* groups. The “radicalization” of the Chechen insurgency has developed in relation to increasingly radical representations of Chechens and North Caucasians in Russia and the use of radical means of violence against these groups by Russian and local authorities.[25] Moreover, this social exclusion has been mirrored in the emerging social inclusion of Chechnya and North Caucasian Muslims in global jihad discourses. The assumption that the “inclusion” of the group in one social setting in contrast to its “exclusion” from another finds support in the literature on jihadism in Europe. Nesser, for example, suggests that jihadi milieus succeed in mobilizing because they offer social gains—such as a clearly defined identity, spirituality, and a consistent ideology defining the wrongdoers of world politics.[26] In *Jihadi Culture*, Hegghammer shows how jihadi groups offer people not only a violent fight but also a full life that meets social, cultural, practical and not least emotional needs.[27]

Social exclusion (as well as inclusion) occur on two levels in society. On the first level, those directly subjected to social exclusion and violence need narratives that can explain their experience and their marginal status in society. Narratives of inclusion and exclusion are constantly provided in the “public debate” that goes on in any society; some of these narratives have an appeal and become widely spread because they “fit” with people’s personal experiences. Empirical findings on insurgent groups in the North Caucasus support the linking of individual experiences of repression and mobilization to violent action.[28] The assumption of a link between social exclusion, verbal as well as physical, and ready mobilization into violent action is also echoed in scholarship on terrorism/jihadism in other parts of the world.[29] In work that focuses primarily on individuals and smaller groups in Europe, *isolation* or *frustration and resentment* are often presented as vehicles for radicalization.[30]

In this article the author assumes that the connection between social exclusion and repression, radical narratives and violent mobilization has relevance on a *second* level in society, among a much broader group than the individuals directly subjected to such treatment. This is in line with a finding by Nesser, who built on social movement theory and saw a *sense* of relative deprivation and social injustice as a starting point for mobilization in Islamist terrorist cells.[31] He noted that, although European jihadists may not necessarily have experienced socio-economic hardships or violence themselves, they still appear alienated and humiliated and thus vulnerable to jihadist propaganda.[32] This observation alerts us to the importance of focusing on the wider, collective level of group identification and how the experiences of a few can become the experiences of the many within a group. Social exclusion and violence as experienced by some group members can become the imagined experience of the entire group through narratives transmitted within the group. Such experiences can function as resources that mobilize people who identify with the group, but who have not necessarily been directly subjected to social exclusion and violence themselves.

This is not surprising. Human beings are social beings: we identify as groups.[33] The suffering or injustice experienced by our “brothers and sisters”—in nationality, gender, class, or faith—is transmitted within the group one identifies with, the communities we imagine ourselves as being part of.[34] Within large societal collectives such as “Chechens” or “Muslims” the radical narratives of the threatened Self and the dangerous Other provide formalized expression of the experience of being victims—as a group. Such narratives also imply justification for a violent struggle against the group represented as the perpetrator, often to achieve the common cause of *a better society*. [35] The existence of collective (albeit changing) understandings of exclusion thus offers fertile ground for social entrepreneurs seeking to mobilize recruits to the cause of violent resistance. Such understandings enlarge the pool of potential recruits far beyond those directly subjected to exclusion and violence.

Still on the collective level, the explanation incorporates Chechen-specific *socio-cultural codes* that enhance collective narratives of violent resistance and prescribe practices of physical protection and revenge. While all groups produce narratives of Self and Other that stipulate logical paths for action, it is argued here that Chechen society has certain cultural codes that contribute to spreading and harnessing narratives with stark

representations of Self and Other—and that encourage violent action as the correct response to exclusion.

As Bandura suggested, drawing on psychology, ‘what is culpable can be made honorable through cognitive reconstrual.’ ‘...destructive conduct’... such as killing... ‘can be made socially acceptable by portraying it in the service of moral purposes.’(...) ‘People can come to see themselves as fighting a legitimate fight against ruthless oppressors’... ‘The task of making violence morally defensible is facilitated when nonviolent options are judged to have been ineffective and utilitarian justifications portray the suffering caused by violent counterattacks as greatly outweighed by the human suffering inflicted by the foe.’[36] Socio-cultural codes and ingrained, radical Self/Other representations appear to serve as vehicles for such cognitive reconstrual of violence. And, the Chechen experience of suffering can easily be seen and projected as outweighing the human suffering of the foe.

Returning now to the Chechen experience of social exclusion, as regards how Chechens have been represented and how they have been treated physically, as well as the cultural codes that help solidify and spread the narratives about this experience. Here one also has to recap the attempted “inclusion” of Chechnya/North Caucasus by the global jihadi milieu. Mapping these elements in the collective social background of the Chechens can demonstrate why gripping accounts of the crises in Syria and the ISIS propaganda that reached the North Caucasus from 2012 onward (see Sagramoso and Yarlykapov in this Special Issue) have resonated amongst the Chechens, facilitating mobilization of some of them into the ranks of the armed jihadists in the Middle East.

The Chechen Experience of Social Exclusion

Representations

Throughout history, the Chechens have been represented as “different” and “dangerous” in Russian society, although such exclusionary representations were only sporadically included in official language in Soviet times. During the 1990s, few new ideas were launched by the rulers in Moscow as to what kind of state the new Russian Federation was and just who the people belonging to this state were.[37][38] Although this was obviously an inadequate strategy for nation-building, it also meant that the ethnically and religiously distinct North Caucasians were not explicitly excluded from the new Russian state by the country’s leadership. Even during the First Chechen War (1994–1996) the “Chechens” were not securitized as a threat to Russia in official Russian discourse.[39]

This has changed over the past twenty years: deep identity divides in Russian society have been accentuated between “Chechens,” “North Caucasians,” and “Russians.” In recent years Russian authorities have also begun to articulate a less inclusive Russian national identity: During the Second Chechen War (1999–2002), which was labelled a counterterrorist campaign, the Russian leadership employed the word “terrorist” rather than “Chechen” or “Muslim” when referring to the enemy. Nevertheless, the constant conjunction of the words “terrorist” and “Chechen” in public discourse during the war served to constitute and merge these social groups into a single category of danger and otherness. As documented elsewhere, the net effect of the campaign against Chechnya from 1999 onward has been the social exclusion of Chechnya from Russia and Chechens from Russian society.[40]

The problematic experience of social exclusion has been broadened after the Second Chechen War to include Muslims who adhere to Salafism.[41] Within Chechnya the installation of Akhmad Kadyrov as Moscow’s middleman and the “Chechenization” of the republic from 2000 onward meant that new internal identity divides were accentuated. As Russell noted, the Kadyrov regime adopted the Kremlin vocabulary of “criminals,” “bandits” and “terrorists” to denote Chechens who espoused separatist or Islamists agendas as well as diaspora Chechens.[42] Ramzan Kadyrov, son of Akhmad Kadyrov, who became head of the republic in 2007, has reinforced a broadly pro-Russian discourse that juxtaposes traditional Sufi Islam of the *Qadiri tariqat* to the Salafis in Chechnya, represented as “enemies of Islam” who must be “physically annihilated.” In effect, Kadyrov has created a new Chechen “common sense” that relies on singling out parts of the Chechen population as enemies, even as “evil.”[43] Moreover, the manipulation and distortion of Chechen traditions at the hands of the

Kadyrov regime and the barring of internal adversaries from all political processes are likely to have created a sense of social exclusion amongst Chechens far beyond “Wahhabi” circles.[44]

Such processes of exclusion on the local level have been exacerbated by recent developments in the articulation of Russian identity by the Kremlin. Initially careful to project Russia as a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional state, the Russian leadership, faced with popular demands for a “more ethnic Russian” national identity articulation as well as for apartheid-like policies on the grounds of North Caucasians being “foreign” to Russia, moved to adopt a more ethnic state identity from 2012 onward.[45] With the annexation of Crimea, the accentuation of Russianness as constitutive of Russia’s state identity became even more explicit in official rhetoric.[46] Judging by official statements in recent years, the Russian leadership is now retreating to a less ethno-nationalist state identity more fitting for a state such as the Russian Federation; but the projection and public articulation of a less inclusive Russian identity has already added a new layer of exclusion to the Chechen experience.[47]

This social differentiation and exclusion of Chechens/North Caucasians has been clearly expressed in words at the official, as well as at the popular levels in the Russian Federation. Such verbal exclusion has materialized in specific policies and practices that have made the lives of North Caucasians, and Chechens in particular, more vulnerable and “dispensable” than those of other Russians.

Wars and Violence

The Chechens have a long history as a punished people. The Russian conquest of the North Caucasus (1785–1871) was extremely violent.[48] In the Soviet history of repression and violence, the 1944 deportation of the Chechens (as well as other North Caucasian peoples), primarily to the Kazakh steppe, stands out as one of the most brutal events.[49] While the First Chechen War (1994–1996) was not popular in Russian society and ended with the defeat of the Russian Army, the large-scale devastation and physical destruction of Chechnya and the people living there is well documented.[50]

During the Second Chechen War, the Chechen population was again subjected to massive violence; exclusionary practices against the Chechens as a group were carried out in Russian society far beyond the borders of Chechnya.[51] Following the end of large-scale military operations in 2001, violent state practices were institutionalized as the prime instrument for curbing dissent and controlling Chechnya’s population.[52] Akhmad Kadyrov’s rule over the territory represented the continuation of this type of rule. Today, Russian governance in Chechnya, carried out by Ramzan Kadyrov, relies heavily on brute force.[53] Unlawful detentions, torture and forced disappearances remain widespread and systematic in the republic.[54] Moreover, Kadyrov’s has applied force against the population in Chechnya and beyond with near-total impunity.[55]

Within this broader context of physical repression in Chechnya the special status of the Salafis must be noted. In Chechnya, as throughout the North Caucasus republics, a ban on the practice of Salafism was introduced during the Second Chechen War. This was followed up by a campaign of severe repression against suspected fighters and Salafi followers in the eastern part of the North Caucasus. As documented by Toft and Zhukov, the counterinsurgency strategy in this region has relied heavily on repression, focusing on the selective but widespread liquidation of insurgents.[56] Government forces usually opt to kill rebels instead of negotiating their surrender, and arrests of suspected militants are rare.[57] More specifically, when the Caucasus Emirate was routed in the North Caucasus in 2014–2015, this was achieved through extensive targeted assassinations of militants and their leadership in Dagestan, Chechnya, and Kabardino-Balkaria during Russian counter-insurgency operations.[58] Despite the exodus of fighters from the North Caucasus to Syria and Iraq and a decrease in the level of insurgent activity in the North Caucasus from 2012 onward, the preoccupation with “preventive” counterterrorist activities in the region only increased with the rise of the Islamic State, the Russian military engagement in Syria, and growing fears that radicalized fighters there could return to the North Caucasus.[59]

From this track record, it is easy to see that the Chechens and those claiming to fight the “just cause” of the Chechens and the Muslims in the North Caucasus have a collective experience of being subjected to violence and social exclusion on a large scale and over a long period. While this experience is not unique in a global setting, any explanation of Chechen mobilization into violent jihad that disregards it would be insufficient.

The Narration of Chechen Exclusion and Inclusion

Harnessing the Experience of Exclusion

Chechen experiences of verbal and physical exclusion are indeed *real*. However, in focus here is how these experiences are narrated and transmitted among Chechens and how the social entrepreneurs who have sought to mobilize a violent (re-)action have referred to these experiences in their narratives of “resistance”.

The continuous and widespread self-understanding of Chechens as punished and Russia as a dangerous Other has emerged as a direct consequence of the accounts constantly told about the Caucasian wars, the deportations and the two recent post-Soviet wars. These stories have been part of everyday life in Chechen families, also in exile.[60] Moreover, there are specific cultural codes that serve to amplify the Chechen experience of exclusion and make the Chechens prone to repeating and spreading radical narratives of Self and Other. Although Chechen culture is changing, as are all cultures, it still seems to be an *honor culture* in certain respects. [61] Retaliation and the necessity of responding to an insult appear widespread in Chechen society today, as demonstrated when 200,000 Chechens gathered in the village of Geldagan in August 2018 for the burial of Yusup Temirkhanov, a Chechen sentenced for having killed a Russian military officer who had killed a young Chechen girl during the Second Chechen War.

Moreover, the duty of retaliation can be passed down to succeeding generations. The practice referred to as *seven generations* is arguably diluted among Chechens today, but implies that it is mandatory for Chechen males to remember the name of their male ancestors as well as how they died and the location of their tombstone seven generations back. Very often these ancestors are said to have died at the hands of Russian “colonizers.”[62] Thus, narratives of a physically threatened Self/threatening Other as well as violent action as the correct “way out” become spread in Chechen society and sometimes even reverberate over generations. This quote from the Chechen warlord Shamil Basayev illustrates the point: “Everyone in my family, through seven generations, fought the Russians. I consider it an honour to fight because I must continue what my father and ancestors began.”[63]

In sum, there is not only a stark history of continuous social exclusion and violence, there are also distinct cultural codes that serve to recirculate and spread narratives with radical representations of Self and Other within the Chechen community. These representations constitute a reservoir available to social entrepreneurs seeking to mobilize people to violent action. That is not to say that every Chechen can be easily mobilized to violent action, nor that other non-violent narratives do not exist. However, a review of the narratives implicit in the shifting ideology of the insurgency of the North Caucasus shows how these have all been radical narratives of violent mobilization and with obvious potential resonance within the Chechen social context. In the nationalist-separatist narrative of the early 1990s, the punished Self was defined primarily in terms of “Chechen,” the radical Other in terms of “Russia” (the state)—and the way to achieve survival was through violent resistance. [64] Dzhokhar Dudayev and other independence leaders drew heavily on the Chechen legacy of suffering, representing the entire history from 1785 (when Russian colonization of the North Caucasus began) onward as one long struggle by Chechens against Russian domination.[65]

In the core narrative of the national jihad ideology which developed during the interwar period (1996–1999), the mistreated Self was no longer defined in terms of Chechens, but in terms of “Muslims of the Caucasus.”[66] The radical, threatening Other was still primarily represented as “colonial Russia,” but then came a shift towards emphasizing “Russia” as an “infidel”: one of many in a broader transnational setting. Targeting “the West” was not a goal as such, but the Caucasus Emirate was projected as “part of a global jihad” and appeals were made to the worldwide Ummah for support to the suffering Muslims of the Caucasus.[67] Violent jihad, including the targeting of civilians in Russian cities, was projected as a legitimate means to achieve the goal of an independent, Sharia-based state.[68]

Emerging Inclusion?

As the evolution of these ideologies shows, there has been a widening of the threatened Self to include Muslims

beyond the Chechens, first in the North Caucasus and then in the Muslim Ummah as such. There has also been a widening of the definition of the Other, with Russia increasingly projected as one of many “infidels” in the broader transnational setting. This shift towards a narrative that parallels transnational jihadi ideology may be explained with reference to insurgents “copying” global trends, as is often the case.[69] But it can also be explained with reference to the experience of *social inclusion* and the continuous narration of such inclusion, fostering wider group identification. Just as the experience of social exclusion from Russia has created fertile ground for radical representations of Russia that legitimize violent resistance, the social inclusion of the Chechens in (different versions of) the Muslim community has paved the way for an expansion of the threatened Self beyond the Chechens, making acts of solidarity with Muslim brothers in the Middle East logical.

Historically the Chechens have a secondary but still significant identification as Muslims which has been accentuated in times of war. Resistance against Russian colonization in the North Caucasus in the late 1700 and in the 1800 was mobilized under the banner of *jihad/Ghazavat* and by invoking Muslim identity as well as *taip* or family ties.[70] While the Soviet period had a secularizing effect that was evident in the ideology of the separatist movement of the 1990s, the emergence of global jihad came to offer a type of social inclusion that the insurgency could not find elsewhere. The Chechen separatist movement had initially sought support from the liberal and rights-oriented Western states after the First Chechen War, but were disappointed by the lack of support. Disappointment grew when the West seemed to accept the Second Chechen War, as well as the accompanying gross abuses of human rights, as part of the War on Terror.[71] By contrast, the foreign jihadi fighters who joined the Chechen separatists during the First Chechen War were considered instrumental in winning it, and were decorated as heroes of Ichkeria after the war. Moreover, jihadi leaders such as Osama bin Laden increasingly projected and invoked the North Caucasus as part of the global jihadi front and the North Caucasians as belonging to his version of the Muslim Ummah. Offers of financial resources and education followed this verbal inclusion.[72]

Despite the “failure” of the transnational jihadists, who became very unpopular during the interwar period, there was a new wave of “offers” of social inclusion into violent jihad by transnational movements in the wake of Second Chechen War. The former leader of the Caucasus Emirate, Dokku Umarov, alluded to the growing pull of this transnational movement in stating “It was evident that people would not follow us, our ranks would not be replenished under the flag of Ichkeria... We were forced by the times themselves and the new generation of Islamic youth to proclaim the Emirate.”[73] The internet has been a crucial facilitator of this more recent process of social inclusion and mobilization into transnational jihad. While Russian authorities did crush the insurgency by policies of assassination and border control, the radical narratives of ISIS/IS spread through the internet into the North Caucasus. According to Yarlykapov, by 2014 *#hijra* had become the most popular hashtag in the eastern parts of North Caucasus.[74] For young Chechens, *#hijra* can hold a strong appeal. Even though they had not experienced life in the Islamic State, the idea that models of governance offered by Islam could ensure much better lives than what they had experienced in Russia’s Chechnya was widespread. Recent interviews conducted in Grozny showed that the majority of Chechen men and women surveyed preferred the vision of Chechnya as an independent religious state governed by a combination of Sharia law and the traditional Adat.[75]

In sum, the record shows an uneven yet expanding experience of inclusion in the global Islamic community that parallels the experience and narrative of Russian exclusion of Chechen society. This inclusion created grounds for the widening of the threatened Self, long underway in the narratives of the insurgency before the advent of the Islamic State project. Important to understand why some Chechens were mobilized to fight jihad in the Levant is to realize that already before the crises in Syria there was a strong basis of resonance that ISIS propaganda could play to—namely in Chechen narratives of Self as victim, Other as existential threat and violence as legitimate solution. When the Islamic State emerged in mid-2014 as a physical reality and apparent success story on the territory of Syria and Iraq, engaging in this struggle so far from home began to look increasingly worthwhile.

Texts of Chechen Fighters in the Levant

A review of 35 texts and videos from Chechen fighters in the Levant showed the expected type of merger of narratives and underlined the importance of including the broader, collective social terrain in explanations of mobilization for violent action. The idea of the mistreated Self is strong in these texts and invokes primarily a Muslim identity (much broader than the “Chechens”). Other Muslims are often referred to as “brothers” and “sisters.” Internally, within the Chechen collective, there are indications of a divide, between the true believers and the *murtads* (those who no longer can be considered Muslims)—often with clear references to the Kadyrov regime.[76] This distinction connects the Chechen fighters more closely to fighters of other origin than to some of their own countrymen: we can see how for them the Kadyrov regime has become part of the threatening Russian Other.[77] Indeed, Russia as an existential threat that must be fought by violent means is still very much present in the narrative of the Chechen fighters. Direct reference is made to Putin and to Russians as such. There is still the idea of collective guilt, which implies that not only the Russian leadership, but the Russians as such are a legitimate target. Then, into this chain of radical and dangerous Others, Assad is added, as a “tyrant” like Putin or simply as part of the “external enemy”.[78] As noted by Salakhuddin Shishani “Actually our youth came to this place to fight against Assad”.[79]

Thus, judging by the representations of Self and Other, the fight with fellow Muslims in Syria is being waged against the same foe and is in many ways a continuation of the Chechens’ struggle at home, which they are now prevented from taking part in because of the overwhelming use of force by the Russian state.[80] For the young Chechen fighters who have not fought in the North Caucasus, parallels and ties of solidarity are built in the opposite direction: the terrorist attack in Grozny in December 2014 is an inspiration, and calls are made to send money to the Caucasus rather than Syria.[81] The close affiliation of the struggle in Syria with the Chechens’ own struggle in North Caucasus became a key factor in their mobilization. Ironically, it also became the key argument in favor of their later expulsion from the community of “proper” global jihadists in Syria.[82]

While there also are new elements, such as the reference to the Prophet’s *hadith* about Sham (on the centrality of the Levant), the exclusion and violence suffered at the hands of the external enemy is a central element in the narrative. Note also how the suffering caused by violent counterattacks is portrayed as greatly outweighed by the human suffering inflicted by the Other.[83]

“The main reason we are here is the Hadith of our Prophet about Sham. And then the *zulm* (cruelty/unjust acts of exploitation etc.) suffered by the Syrian people. That which the Syrian people are going through is not alien to us. We have suffered this *zulm* for years and we are the nation that best understands the state that the Syrians are in. We are alike in that. And we saw just how much of a friendly people they are. As it says in the Hadith about Sham, we met the nation for whom we do not mind fighting or dying for”.[84]

Just as the references to the historical grievances of the Chechens have been a constant in the changing narratives of the insurgency, the grievances of the Syrians are projected as the main motivation for fighting alongside them. Reference is constantly made to the violence, suffering, and terror to which Sunni Muslims in Syria are subjected, and parallels are drawn to the Russian destruction of Chechnya and Chechens. Historically and more recently, appeals are made to fellow Chechens: it is their duty to protect these people.[85]

“In Chechnya, I fought against those who terrorized my people, who killed both the strong and the weak, including women, children and the elderly, in order to subjugate them by intimidation. And here in Syria I fight against those who are terrorizing this people in the same way. ...all this we had seen in Chechnya....”.[86]

Indeed, for some the duty to “continue to help weak and downtrodden peoples” seems more important than acting in solidarity with fellow Muslims.[87] On the whole, the narrative that emerges from the texts of Chechen fighters in Syria looks like yet another rehash of the ideologies of violent resistance that have been evolving in Chechnya ever since the early 1990s.

Given the representation of a Muslim Self existentially threatened by a radical Other that now includes Russia, Chechen Murtads, and Assad, violent response is justified:

“...today you attacked our brothers. And today we are going to attack you....We will never accept this slavery, and as soon as Allah gives us the slightest chance to escape this situation, we will rush at them like lions and fight until we are liberated from them by the will of Allah... And today we hear how our heroes are throwing themselves at the enemy, with bare hands, so to speak, preferring death to humiliation and dying as martyrs, InshAllah”.[88]

What will be achieved through this violent fight? It is “a society where life will be run according to the divine law, a society in which the rights that the Almighty gave to people will be returned to them, even if they are not Muslims,” and a country where people “can freely practice their religion”.[89] This vision represents the inverse of the Chechen experience in Russia—or at least how this experience has featured in the accounts told in Chechen society. This must be taken into account in explaining why some Chechens left to join jihad in the Levant.

Conclusion

The process of radicalization must be understood and studied as relational. The core mobilizing tool in a process toward violent (re-)action is a narrative that projects the Other as so different from, and so dangerous to, the Self that the use of violence is legitimized. Moreover, the shift to more radical representations of the other group occurs in a mutual pattern of imagining and interaction *between* groups. Over the past 30 years, the way has been paved for recruiting Chechens into armed jihad in the Levant by their social and physical exclusion in Russia, and how this brutal experience has been framed and amplified in collective narratives. In many ways this is simply an instance of the old dictum that violence breeds violence, which somehow gets forgotten or subdued when scholars seek to explain terrorism or radicalization. It is tempting to view a phenomenon like Islamic State as purely the product of itself, outside of any interaction with other political actors—but that does not hold.

While the Chechen experience of inclusion in a global Islamic community is far less tangible than that of their exclusion from Russia, there has been a growing sense of identification among Chechens and in the rhetoric of the insurgency of being part of a wider Muslim community. This has provided an audience for ISIS/IS propaganda. As the texts reviewed for this article showed, it has also meant that the plight of Muslims in the Levant could be recognized as happening to “us”—unleashing the resources of revenge, but also solidarity and the urge to offer resistance.

Taken together, the Chechen social contexts of exclusion and inclusion have resonated with the appeals of ISIS/IS propaganda as well as the evolving situation on the ground in the Levant. This social context, latent irrespective of the fate of the Islamic State, constitutes the main challenge for the Russian federal and republican leadership in their approach to the North Caucasus in the future. Future violent mobilization in Chechnya cannot be dealt with by eradicating “terrorists” or “radicals” through the use of force: it calls for a deliberate strategy of inclusion, in words and deeds.

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Notes

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- [7] Mark Youngman, “Ideology along the contours of power: the case of the Caucasus Emirate” in this Special Issue. Also, Yarlykapov and Sagramoso, op. cit.
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- [9] Arun Kudnani, (2012) “Radicalisation: the Journey of a Concept”. *Race & Class*, 54:2, p. 3; Alex P. Schmid, (March 2013) “Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review”, *Research Paper*, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism the Hague; Peter Neumann, (2013) “The trouble with radicalization”, *International Affairs*, 4, pp. 873–893.
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- [13] Ibid.; Albert Bandura, (1990) op. cit., pp. 7–8 on palliative characterizations and level of violence.
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- [15] Martha Crenshaw, (1981) “The Causes of Terrorism”, *Comparative Politics*, 13:4, p. 380; Jeffrey Ian Ross, (1993), op. cit., pp. 317–329; Brynjar Lia and Katya Skjølberg (2004) “Causes of Terrorism: An Expanded and Updated Review of the Literature”, *FFI/RAPPORT – 2004/04307*. Kjeller, Norway: Norwegian Defence Research Establishment; Ole Martin Stormoen, (2016) *Global jihad Explained? A Critical Review of the post-9/11 Literature on the Causes of Transnational Jihadi Terrorism*. Master’s Thesis, University of Oslo. Campana, Aurelie and Luc Lapointe (2011) divide studies on non-suicide terrorism into those focusing on the individual, the collective and the national level of analysis (“The Structural ‘Root Causes of Non-Suicide Terrorism: A Systematic Scoping Review”, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 24:1, pp. 79–104: 88).
- [16] Quintan Wiktorowicz, (2004) “Joining the Cause: Al Muhajiroun and Radical Islam”, paper presented at “The Roots of Islamic Radicalism” Conference, Yale University; Marc Sageman, (2008) *Leaderless Jihad: The Face of Modern Terror*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press; Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, (2008) “Mechanisms of Political Radicalization: Pathways Toward Terrorism”, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 20:3, pp. 415–433; Petter Nesser, (2012) “Jihad in Europe. Patterns in Islamist Terrorist Cell Formation and Behaviour, 1995–2010.” PhD thesis. Oslo: University of Oslo. For general overviews, see for example, Edward Newman (2006) “Exploring the “Root Causes” of Terrorism”, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 29:8, 749–772: 749; Campana and Lapointe (2011), op. cit.
- [17] Martha Crenshaw, (1981), op. cit.; Jeffrey Ian Ross, (1993), op. cit.; Edward Newman, (2006), op. cit. As shown by Aurelie Campana and Luc Lapointe, (2011), op. cit., pp. 79–104, authors working in the terrorism subfield have become more and more interested in structural root causes of terrorism.

- [18] As noted by Edward Newman (2006), op. cit. p. 751, a range of precipitant factors—such as leadership, funding, state sponsorship, political upheaval—form essential intervening variables between root causes and terrorism.
- [19] State repression is given particular emphasis in this article, addressing a void in the literature identified by Aurelie Campana and Luc Lapointe, (2011), op. cit., pp. 90–91.
- [20] This author concurs with Rajae's argument that the roots (of terrorism) 'lie in the politics of exclusion and the emergence of a triad of dispossession, empowerment and an ideology that justifies violence', theorizing the connection between dispossession and an ideology that justifies violence through the social identification perspective. (Farhang Rajae, (2002) 'The challenges of the rage of empowered dispossessed: the case of the Muslim world'. In *Responding to Terrorism: What Role for the United Nations?*, p. 35.)
- [21] Julie Wilhelmsen, (1999) *Conflict in the Russian Federation – two case studies, one Hobbesian explanation*. NUPI Report 249. Oslo: NUPI; Julie Wilhelmsen, (2005) "Between a rock and a hard place – The Islamisation of the Chechen separatist movement," *Europe-Asia Studies*, 57:1, pp. 35–59; James Hughes, (2007) *Chechnya: From Nationalism to Jihad*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
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- [29] See Edward Newman, (2006), op. cit. p. 753 for a series of examples.
- [30] Robin L. Thompson, (2012) "Radicalization and the Use of Social Media", *Journal of Strategic Security* 4:4, pp. 167–190; Olivier Roy, (2015) "What Is the Driving Force Behind Jihadist Terrorism? – A Scientific Perspective on the Causes/Circumstances of Joining the Scene", BKA Autumn Conference, November 18–19; URL: <https://life.eui.eu/wpcontent/uploads/2015/11/OLIVIER-ROY-what-is-a-radical-islamist.pdf>; Thomas Hegghammer, (2010) "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad," *Quarterly Journal International Security*, 35:3, pp. 53–94; Marc Sageman, 2004, op. cit.
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- [32] Petter Nesser, (2010), op. cit., p. 521. Also Newman notes that terrorists (just like other people) surely do not act only according to their own experience or background (op. cit, p. 755)
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- [64] Julie Wilhelmsen (1999) “Konflikt i den russiske føderasjon: To kasusstudier: en hobbesiansk forklaring,” *NUPI Report* 249. Oslo: NUPI, pp. 43–66. Note that “Muslim” has been presented as a self-evident part of being “Chechen,” also within nationalist separatist discourse.
- [65] Anatol Lieven, (1999) *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, p. 204; Valery Tishkov, (2004), op. cit., p. 15.
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- [77] Interview with Muslim Shishani by an independent Chechen media outlet, February 5, 2017. URL: <http://nohchicho.com/interview/muslim-shishani-interview/>, on how the Chechens have become “Mankurts,” prisoners of war turned into slaves by having their heads wrapped in a camel skin, which tightened when it dried, erasing their memories. The term entered into popular use in the former USSR to refer to people who had become estranged from their own national roots by russification; interview with Muslim

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[78] Message from Young Fighter in Chechnya, “Now the Fight Comes,” December 2016. URL: <http://jihadology.net/2016/12/28/new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-now-now-the-fighting-comes-wilayat-al-qawqaz/>; Interview with AbdulHakim Shishani, the amir of Ajnad al-Kavkaz, July 14, 2017. URL: <http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=25394>; Interview with Muslim Shishani, March 5, 2018. URL: <http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=25963>

[79] Salakhuddin Shishani in: “Salakhuddin Shishani fought under Gelayev and in Abkhazia”, May 27, 2015. URL: <http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=23790>

[80] Albdulhakim Shishani in Chechen address to the Syrian people on *fitna* (conflict, infighting) between different jamaat (groups), August 4, 2017. URL: <http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=25414>; Interview with Muslim Shishani, September 14, 2014. URL: <http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=22563>; Muslim Abu Walid Shishani of Jundu Sham, March 28, 2014. URL: <http://www.checheninsyria.com/?p=21346#more.21346>

[81] Jaish al-Muhajideen wal-Ansar to Caucasus Emirate in Chechnya: We were inspired by Grozny attack in December, April 13, 2015. URL: <http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=23672#more-23672>; Video link (now dead) posted on September 1, 2014. URL: <http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=22489>

[82] “Muslim Shishani raises Chechen flag above that of Allah,” July 11, 2014. URL: <http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=22231#more-22231>

[83] Albert Bandura, (1990), op. cit., p. 3

[84] The *hadiths* in question can be found at URL: <https://axmadabusaad.livejournal.com/987.html>. They all describe the main points of virtue of al-Sham (the Levant), which refers to the lands now known as Jordan, Syria, Palestine and Lebanon; URL: <https://ilmfeed.com/10-virtues-of-al-shaam/>; Muslim Shishani interview with Turkish-language Al-Jazeera, October 22, 2015. URL: <http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=24202>; see also the new leader of Sayfullah’s jamaat Mohammed Khorasani for references to the *hadiths* and the duty of fighting in Sham, February 26, 2014. URL: <http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?paged=48>

[85] 25-year-old native of Chechnya, Magomed S., who left to fight in the summer of 2014: “I came across a video where women and children were tortured. Their pain and tears could not leave me indifferent [...] This war is not worth dying for”, January 25, 2015. URL: <https://ria.ru/world/20150125/1044211299.html>; Video depicting two Chechen foreign fighters, where one is delivering a passionate message to his brothers at home: “...How can it be possible that your soul doesn’t tremble from a thought that your sisters may be in prisons, how can you not be seeing that children are slaughtered. What is happening here – it cannot be solved with a prayer, prayers are not enough here. Take action. Allah says “Act! And pray”. URL: <http://imperiya.by/video/dWEVCvc5MMp/heham.html>; See also message from young fighter in Chechnya, “Now the Fight Comes,” December 2016. URL: <http://jihadology.net/2016/12/28/new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-now-now-the-fighting-comes-wilayat-al-qawqaz/>; Interview with Abdul Hakim Shishani, Amir of Ajnad al-Kavkaz, July 14, 2017. URL: <http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=25394>; Albdul Hakim Shishani in Chechen, address the Syrian people on *fitna*, August 4, 2017. URL: <http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=25414>; Interview with Muslim Shishani to an independent Chechen media outlet February 5, 2017. URL: <http://nohchicho.com/interview/muslim-shishani-interview/>; Interview with Abdul Hakim Shishani, Amir of Adjad al-Kavkaz, February 17, 2017. URL: <http://nohchicho.com/interview/abdul-hakim-interview/>

[86] Muslim Shishani, Amir of Junud al-Sham jamaat in Syria, in interview with Russian-speaking pro-Islamist independent media activist Muhammad Jazira, October 20, 2017. URL: <http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=25526>; AlbdulHakim Shishani in Chechen, address the Syrian people on *fitna*, August 4, 2017. URL: <http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=25414>

[87] Chechen fighter from the Chechen-led militant group Ajnad al-Kavkaz “Why doesn’t the world condemn Russia’s Syria bombings?” February 12, 2016. URL: <http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=24671>

[88] Message from young fighter in Chechnya, “Now the Fight Comes,” December 2016. URL: <http://jihadology.net/2016/12/28/new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-now-now-the-fighting-comes-wilayat-al-qawqaz/>; Interview with Muslim Shishani by an independent Chechen media outlet, February 5, 2017. URL: <http://nohchicho.com/interview/muslim-shishani-interview/>

[89] Interview with Abdul Hakim Shishani, Amir of Ajnad al-Kavkaz, July 14, 2017. URL: <http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=25394> AlbdulHakim Shishani in Chechen, address to the Syrian people on *fitna*, August 4, 2017. URL: <http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=25414>