

Islamic Conflict and Violence in Local Communities: Lessons from the North Caucasus

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Abstract

The internal dynamics of religiously motivated confrontations based on local community divides can trigger radicalization and violence, also outside the local community. However, theories on radicalization and conflict rarely take into account the significance of such local confrontations. In this article a three-stage model of such local Islamic conflict - conflict disagreement, conflict divide, and conflict violence - is elaborated, based on rich ethnographic material from the North Caucasus. The causes of conflict intensification and/or conflict moderation are discussed, as is the correlation between local conflicts and violent mobilizations. Ways of incorporating outcomes from local conflict research into conflict and radicalization theories are presented at the end.

Keywords: Local Conflict, Deeply Divided Communities, radicalization, Islam, violence, North Caucasus, Russia

Introduction

In many Muslim communities of the North Caucasus, disagreements relating to interpretations of Islam have long been evident. However, from the 1990s, a new type of conflict appeared: a group of Muslims challenged the entire way of life, norms and traditions of a community. These dissidents were initially called “Wahhabis,” later “Salafis.” The conflicts emerged against the backdrop of the radical social transformations after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, characterized by the market transformation of the economy, intensified migration, and the growing influence of globalization.

This article explores the preconditions and dynamics of such religiously inspired conflicts in local communities in the North Caucasus. It also offers some reflections on how the empirical analysis of such conflicts can inform both conflict and radicalization theories.

Special attention is paid to the conditions allowing a conflict to reach the violent stage. Escalation to violence appears most probable in socially closed, traditional communities where little value is attributed to secular education, where Islamic youth had previously participated in violent conflicts and where either security forces or insurgents (or both) were involved. Conversely, violence was least likely in communities where differences in values were accepted, people were relatively well-educated and enjoyed channels of horizontal and vertical mobility, where young people had no experience of armed conflict, and where conflict management mechanisms were established in time. Ideology played a supporting role, but was not central in any of the cases examined here.

This article opens with a discussion of some theoretical models offered for the analysis of religiously inspired conflicts on the local level, and its author concludes that there are no ready-made models in the academic literature that adequately explain the case under investigation here. Next follows a description of the methodology applied in this study and an explanation of how the fieldwork was organized. In the second section, building on fieldwork materials, the author concentrates on the dynamics of conflict in the local communities studied. Three possible stages of conflict are identified: *conflict disagreement*, *conflict divide*, and *conflict violence*. In the third section, the differences in conflict dynamics in various localities are examined. Characteristics of local communities, the background of the religious dissidents, the involvement of external forces with violent potential, conflict management mechanisms are among the explanatory factors. Section four presents case studies of two communities with differing conflict dynamics, to show how the factors identified earlier work in practice. The final section offers some conclusions.

Theory and Methodology

The situation in the Northern Caucasus has invited two approaches to the study of communal conflict. On the one hand, various strands of conflict theory have analyzed the emergence of conflicts based on communal divides: these include models of deeply divided societies and sectarian conflict.[1][2] Various theoretical approaches have been applied in analyzing such conflicts: some scholars have considered conflicting social identities as durable if not primordial; others have seen identities as made and politically manipulated, not begotten.[3] There is widespread consensus on the need to progress beyond the pure versions of both approaches, but a unified view of what a more consolidated position would look like has not yet been developed.[4]

However, conflicts studied within both of these models are usually of a different type than those under consideration here. First, scholars have tended to concentrate on the national level: “cases” continue to be identified generally with “countries”.[5] Political mobilization and the struggle for power are central to these analyses. Already in 2004 Charles King called for a micropolitical turn, but in vain.[6] Analysis developed in a different direction: “the method of in-depth country case studies was abandoned in favor of a large N approach.”[7] Second, even where the local level has been the object of study, researchers have dealt mainly with historically formed identities that preceded a conflict and became politicized just before or during the conflict.[8] For Islamic communities, Sunni–Shia confrontations have attracted most attention.

The analytical focus pursued here is on quite small communities, where issues of power, authority, and politics in general look different than in big political entities, and alternative mobilization methods are used. It also deals with the emerging identities that are shaped *during* a conflict, not prior to it. Conflict theories have provided tools for analyzing each of these two aspects, but not both. For instance, Brubaker’s “grouping, not groups” approach can help with the issue of evolving identities, but it concentrates on the purely political aspects of a conflict relevant for large territorial entities. It remains to be seen how such a model can be adjusted for analysis on the local level.[9]

On the other hand, there are various theories explaining religiously motivated violence, terrorism, and radicalization. These deal with the emerging identities related to interpretations of Islam and, from this perspective, are relevant for the present study. In the past, many scholars have used contextual factors such as structural transformations (urbanization, globalization, etc.), government policies, cultural peculiarities as their explanatory basis. These contexts were seen as provoking negative feelings - deprivation, frustration, and motives for revenge. Alternatively, as stressed by proponents of rational choice theory, contexts may form an opportunity structure where violent conflict is the preferred option. [10]

After major devastating terrorist acts in the United States and Europe, radicalization theory emerged in the early 2000s. Initially, radical Islamic ideology was seen as the main explanatory variable underlying religiously motivated violence.[11] However, many researchers did not agree, pointing out that not all radical Islamic ideologies call for violent solutions, and that not all those who share jihadist views are prepared to apply violence in practice.[12] The differences and links between ideological justification for violence and violent behavior have become one of the central issues in current discussions on radicalization.[13] Various causes, manifestations and trajectories of radicalization (from above and from below) are now recognized.[14] However, the impact of initial simple models has remained significant, both for counterterrorism policy and for academic debate.[15] As yet there is no unified understanding and approach to analyzing the phenomenon of radicalization.

Different approaches to explain radicalization have been developed. Along with ideology, such motives as material incentives, adventure, status, etc. have been considered as pull factors.[16] Some scholars stress the role of social networks, personal relations, and small-group dynamics in the mobilization for violence, whereby social bonds are considered to “come before any ideological commitment.”[17] Others claim it is necessary to pay greater attention to political processes per se.[18] State violence is also recognized as a factor that may promote violent extremism.[19]

This rich and controversial literature on radicalization has informed the present study, providing a list of possible factors to be checked in the analysis. Moreover, many of these contributions offer tools for capturing dynamic aspects of the process. “Radicalization” as a concept stresses the evolving character of identity formation, and has contributed to the use of dynamic models in the forms of “conveyor belts”, “staircases” or “pyramids”.[20] However, this type of framework usually does not include *conflict* as such, and communal conflict in particular, nor is it constructed for the study of conflict dynamics. Instead, the focus is on radicalized individuals and groups, and often does not take their opponents into account. Even when it does, what is studied is usually conflict with the state, not within a community.

Thus, the theoretical approach in this research is mixed. Perspectives that identities are not given, but evolving (stressed, for instance, by Brubaker), are taken into account, but with the reservation that they should be adjusted to the specifics of conflicts on the local level. Factors discussed in the debate on the causes of religiously motivated violence (structural peculiarities, ideology, social networks, spiral of violence, etc.) will be examined for the specific cluster of cases studied in this article. However, my analysis is not restricted to this list: additional variables have been included, based on the results of the author’s fieldwork. The detailed analysis of religion-inspired local conflict has been an underexplored terrain, with few ready-made models or tools available.

The article is based on fieldwork undertaken between 2011 and 2017 in the four Northern Caucasus republics of Dagestan, Kabardino-Balkaria (KBR), Karachay-Cherkessia (KChR), and Ingushetia. The length of this fieldwork is explained by the fact that studying divided communities is no simple matter. Such communities are often socially closed, avoiding interaction with researchers. This author’s situation was aggravated by the research necessity of communicating with all sides of the conflict, which severely restricted the possibilities of using the “snowball” method. Often, several types of entry into a community had to be secured. Localities were selected primarily on the basis of the possibilities for ensuring the necessary entry to the community and access to as many relevant actors as possible. Members of migrant communities originally from the villages studied but now living in cities or abroad were also contacted.

As not all communities could be studied in the same detail, a “main” and an “additional” sample of communities was formed. The former consisted of fifteen divided communities where it was possible to collect most of the required information. In total, some 140 informants were interviewed there, mostly in the form of group interviews. (See Table 1 for details of the main sample.)

An additional sample consisted of communities where a limited number of interviews were conducted, but these provided valuable information which complemented the data from the main sample. Seven communities were included on this list: Stalskoye, Komsomolskoye, and Khushtada in Dagestan; Kurkuzhin and Belaya Rechka in KBR; Khabez and Inzhich-Chukun in KChR.

Table 1: Communities Studied: Main Sample

	Local Community	Region*	District	Location	Population 1/1/2018	Ethnic composition	Model of conflict
1	<i>Kvanada</i>	Dagestan	Tsumadinski	highlands	1555	Avars (Bagvalins)	conflict violence
2	<i>Gubden</i>	Dagestan	Karabudakhenski	foothills	12518	Dargins (Gubdens)	conflict violence
3	<i>Gimri</i>	Dagestan	Untsukulski	highlands	5081	Avars	conflict violence
4	<i>Khadzhalmakhi</i>	Dagestan	Levashinski	foothills	9053	Dargins	conflict violence
5	<i>Leninkent</i>	Dagestan	Makhachkala	plains	16507	Avars / Kumiks	conflict violence
6	<i>Dugulubgey</i>	KBR	Baksanski	plains	20553	Kabardins	conflict violence
7	<i>Elbrus</i>	KBR	Elbruski	highlands	5192	Balkars	conflict violence
8	<i>Novosaitli</i>	Dagestan	Khasavyurtovski	plains	2267	Avars	conflict violence
9	<i>Sovetskoye</i>	Dagestan	Magarabkentski	plains	4350	Lezgins / Laks	conflict divide
10	<i>Sogratl'</i>	Dagestan	Gunibski	highlands	2666	Avars	conflict divide
11	<i>Tpig</i>	Dagestan	Agulski	highlands	2847	Aguls	conflict divide
12	<i>Karata</i>	Dagestan	Akhvakhski	highlands	4786	Karata	conflict divide
13	<i>Ali-Yurt</i>	Ingusheta	Nazranovski	plains	6393	Ingush	conflict divide
14	<i>Tindi</i>	Dagestan	Tsumadinski	highlands	3644	Avars (Bagvalins)	conflict disagreement
15	<i>Psyzh</i>	KChR	Abazinski	plains	8655	Abazin	conflict disagreement

Dynamics of Conflict

Except for the few cases where the “patriarchs” of the Salafi movement in Dagestan (those who had begun disseminating Salafi ideas as early as the 1970s) were involved, the beginnings of conflict in these various locations were surprisingly similar. A group of young Muslims challenged an established religious community, arguing that the latter’s way of believing as well as the way of living were not correct according to Islamic norms. We can call this initial stage “*conflict disagreement*.”

On the surface, this conflict concerned strictly religious issues. Sometimes minor details of rituals became a point of serious controversy. However, it is not correct to conclude that this was simply a case of religious fanatics unwilling to compromise even on minutiae. To understand the real nature of the conflict it is necessary

to analyze the arguments of both sides.

The advocates of traditional practices defended their position by referring to how their ancestors had always acted. The legacy of the ancestors was almost sacred for them -the basis for the right way of doing things. Moreover, that the religious dissidents were young people and were in the minority was considered as an important argument in defending their position. “It’s just a fashion. It’s because of idleness, people just don’t want to work. The eggs have started teaching the hens.” (elderly male, 2013, Dagestan). The authority of traditions and the elders was their stronghold.

By contrast, their opponents based their authority on a quite different foundation: knowledge of Islam. “Knowledge confronts tradition” (young male, 2014, Dagestan)—this is how an informant summed up the essence of the conflict. For these religious dissidents, neither traditions nor elders were the real authority - only the Islamic scriptures. Not only elders, but also young people could be knowledgeable. This conflict appeared to be one of values and authority, although it was framed as one of religion.

At times, the conflict had certain financial dimensions as well. It was often mentioned that the religious dissidents attracted people by paying them or providing other forms of assistance, but this author found few confirmed stories of this type. However, also the established clergy had financial interests to defend. They had been paid, in money and in kind, for their services at weddings and funerals. By challenging the existing rituals and proposing to conduct the necessary Islamic procedures free of charge, the religious dissidents undermined the sources of earnings for elderly mullahs. That became a factor behind the severity of the conflict in some cases.

Though the initial act of this drama was quite similar in various locations, the stage and the actors differed greatly. Religious conflicts could erupt in at least three different types of communities:

- Deeply religious, socially closed communities that had not been seriously affected by Soviet modernization. Generational and gender hierarchies in those communities were kept almost intact. People there had continued to pray and fast during Ramadan even in Soviet times; religious teachers were working underground; and disputes were solved mainly according to Sharia law. The understanding of Islam was usually quite conservative, and Muslims were urged to have minimal contact with the “infidel” state. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, many young men from such localities were sent abroad by their parents to study Islam; it was a shock for the community when they returned with radically different understandings of Islamic norms.
- Secularized communities, where traditional norms and hierarchies had nevertheless not been undermined. In such communities, the mosque was seen as a place for the elders, and the mere fact that young people started to go to the mosque was often felt almost as an offense. The activity of the younger generation, perceived as a challenge to the established order, evoked fierce responses. In some cases, the parental generation did not interfere even when their offspring were beaten and humiliated by security officers. “Our people didn’t stand up for them, because our elders rejected their activity, their doings. They don’t agree. It’s necessary to stand up for those who are doing the right things” (elderly male, 2014, Dagestan).
- Fragmented communities, where part of the population had become secularized and modernized in Soviet times whereas others followed the old ways. There were not many universal rules and values in such communities, and people had become accustomed to this situation.

The type of community determined at least some characteristics of the one side in the initial conflict - the traditionalists. These could be deeply religious people with a specific Islamic tradition backing up their views, or they might simply be elders, for whom visiting the mosque was prescribed by community norms. Sometimes, earlier religious groupings like various Sufi orders could influence the attitudes of the traditionalists in this new divide, and their positions might not be uniform.

However, it was the specificities of the other side, the dissidents, which played a particularly important role in the conflict dynamics. The main differences lay in how they had acquired their new Islamic ideas:

1. on the spot, without leaving their native community - either through preaching of Salafi scholars or through videotapes and later the Internet;
2. from diasporas living in cities, whose members often visited their native villages;
3. mainly through religious learning abroad - at least one leading group consisted of dozens of people who acquired knowledge of Islam this way, and who then mobilized others;
4. in combination with violent experience - participation in violent conflicts or in training camps where religious lessons were provided together with combat training.

Various groups of dissidents could be present in the same community, and disagreements among them could contribute to the shaping of a conflict. As was the case with traditionalists, dissidents also could become even more divided in the course of the controversy, mainly on the issue of the legitimacy of violence.

If the conflict had not been stopped in this initial stage, a real community divide ensued. If only a small fraction of a community was mobilized, the danger was not very serious. However, if most of the people in the local community found themselves on one or the other side of a conflict, the new stage, which can be called “*conflict divide*”, was reached. The following features characterized this stage (though not all of them might appear in all cases):

- The religious community (*jamaat*) was split: two mosques often started to function for Friday prayer, where different imams were preaching (sometimes two groups of Muslims prayed in sequence in the same mosque); or religious dissidents preferred to pray at the homes of their members.
- Members of a community from the opposite sides, even within one family or clan, stopped communicating: they did not attend weddings or funerals, except for close relatives, did not visit each other, and even refrained from exchanging greetings when encountering each other outdoors.
- Intermarriage between families / members of different sides of the divide stopped.
- Activities aimed at improving local living conditions through mutual support declined. Community members appeared to be unable to self-organize.
- Local mechanisms for dispute resolution ceased to function. In some cases, deeply religious people were forced to appeal to the Russian courts, as there was no authority in their divided community to solve day-to-day problems. Some disputes were not resolved at all.
- In the worst cases, people stopped seeing the other side of a conflict as relatives or neighbors: they began to dehumanize them and see them as enemies.

Stopping conflict is more difficult at this stage than at the previous one. However, in some communities, the conflict had become frozen, and people gradually got accustomed to this: the divide became a feature of daily life, thereby losing its severity. This was the case in some villages in the Khasavurtovski and Kizilurtovski districts of Dagestan (Kirovaul, Oktyabrskoye, Pervomayskoye). In other communities, however, conflict gained momentum, and its potential for violence increased.

Various factors may push a conflict to a violent stage, and different forms of violence can be observed in the process. Sometimes youth started to fight among themselves, leaving people injured and property damaged. However, this form of conflict is fairly traditional in North Caucasus villages. “*Conflict-violence*” was more severe when the sides tried to involve a “third party” with a potential for violence. This could be the security forces or underground Islamic militants, or both. In several cases, traditionalists were accused of appealing to Russian law enforcement agencies, triggering repressions against religious dissidents. Such moves contributed to the radicalization of religious dissidents, who in some cases sought revenge, starting the spiral of violence.

Contrary to the mainstream view of radicalization, it was not only dissidents who could be radicalized in the course of a conflict. In some cases, the traditionalists initiated violent struggle, as in Khadzhalmaḥki and

Leninkent in Dagestan. In the first case, moderate religious dissidents were blamed by traditionalists, who constituted the bulk of the village population, for the activity of insurgents. Quite a few people were killed; others fled in panic. All this happened against the background of the huge financial turmoil related to the fall of the local “financial pyramid.” In the second case, the traditionalists used violence to stop the functioning of the local Salafi mosque. The population of Leninkent is mixed, with both Avars and Kumiks living there. Two mosques were separated mainly on the basis of a religious divide (Sufi vs Salafi) - but the first one was mainly considered as Avar and the second one as Kumik. Thus, both religious and ethnic confrontations played a role in this conflict, but the religious factor was critical.

It is not always easy to trace the direct connection between local conflict escalation and the violent mobilization of its members for an insurgency emerging from the underground. Repression of co-villagers living elsewhere or even of distant members of religious communities might play a role in radicalizing previously moderate dissidents. Regardless, local divides served as an important push-factor. Attempts by the local establishment to marginalize religious dissidents, restrictions on employment, humiliation by security forces, the general atmosphere of conflict and isolation - all these factors were often present in divided communities, fueling the shift to violence. When violent mobilization started, networks of friends and relatives played a key role. In some localities, everybody knew who would be the next to go underground.

Members of communities where youth had started to join underground fighters found themselves in a squeeze. Threats of violence came from both sides - from the security forces, who saw them as terrorist supporters, and from members of paramilitary groups, who blamed them for not being properly Islamic and for interacting with the “infidel” state. “It was impossible to foresee the actions of the security agencies or underground fighters. You’re out walking at night, and can’t know if it’s an officer or a militant approaching” (middle-aged male, 2015, KBR). The atmosphere of terror was universal. Militants even threatened their families; in many cases generational hierarchies and kinship ties were ultimately broken.

Two reactions to this extreme situation within communities could be observed. In some localities it stimulated further divisions. Neighbors saw the relatives of those going underground as guilty; feelings of anger and hate intensified. In other cases, however, the community united and tried to stop their young people from becoming militants. Purely religious divisions were put aside in response to this challenge.

However, eventually the communities became exhausted. The most radical and determined youth had been arrested or killed; people were weary of continued instability and pressure, as well as humiliations and damages to property during anti-terrorist operations. Those who still supported violent struggle became totally marginalized. People really wanted a return to normal life. “Frankly speaking, I’m totally fed up with the religious disagreements here. I want the electricity to work well. I want my drinking water to be clean. Those are my priorities” (middle-aged male, 2015, Dagestan).

Factors Affecting Conflict Dynamics

Every conflict has a unique combination of characteristics and features. However, case studies can indicate which trends might push conflict either to moderation or to intensification.

A comparison of the three different types of localities identified above shows that the most favorable conditions for a conflict intensifying and becoming violent are in the first type - in socially closed, non-modernized religious communities. These communities had maintained traditional gender and generational structures, trying to preserve community coherence and isolation from an “infidel” state as well as from external influences. Poorly educated and with few opportunities for vertical mobility outside their own localities, members of such communities were anxious to uphold the established norms and hierarchies. Religious issues were important for most of the population, so the divide usually involved many local residents.

In the two other types of communities, the potential for negative dynamics was generally weaker. In the traditional secularized type, conflict was on the agenda for only a fraction of the local residents. In such

communities, the divide rarely became total. However, in the absence of deep religiosity, material factors could play a role - local mullahs wanted to defend their earnings.

In fragmented communities, residents had become accustomed to internal differences in values and beliefs. So, when yet another group (religious dissidents) with distinct and divergent values appeared, it was not so shocking as in the other types of communities. This might have contributed to moderation of conflict.

Moreover, in these last two types of communities, people usually had greater opportunities for organizing their life independently outside the locality. For example, religious dissidents might opt for outmigration. Religious conflict sometimes reappeared in the cities, among migrant communities from certain villages (in the words of my informants, “travelled to the cities”), where there was more space for individual views, ideologies and subcultures.

The background of the religious dissidents strongly affected the dynamics of conflict. Where dissidents received knowledge locally, the source of Islamic education was important. They could choose among competing views expressed by various preachers, the most prominent of whom were from Dagestan: Akhmadkadi Akhtaev propagated peaceful political Islam; Bagaudin Kebedov expressed Salafi views and eventually moved to the jihadist position; Ayub was a head of the “takfir” group, which treated most Muslims as infidels. In certain localities different preachers took the lead: for example, Akhmadkadi was popular in Sogratl, as was Ayub in Kvanada.

However, most of those who had obtained Islamic knowledge locally did not leave their accustomed social environment for long periods. That distinguished them from those who had studied abroad, who had participated in the Chechen wars or who had prolonged experience of urban life outside their community. These “stay-at-home” persons had no chance to free themselves from traditional social hierarchies, from community regulations, and it was more difficult for them to persist in challenging the existing order.

The common view is that Islamic studies abroad resulted in the most dangerous ideas, and were largely responsible for conflict intensification. However, that is not always the case. Islamic students with foreign education might take various stands, sometimes pushing conflict for aggravation, but in other cases trying to mediate conflicts and prevent violence. Some prominent figures from the Islamic underground became radicalized not in the course of their religious education abroad, but later. For example, according to this author’s informants, Magomed-Ali Vagabov from Gubden, one of the most brutal leaders of the Caucasus Emirate, returned from Pakistan with quite traditional religious views and turned to the jihadist worldview later.

What definitely fueled local conflicts was the participation of community members in violent conflicts outside the local community, especially in the Chechen wars. Fighters brought home experiences of violence and humiliation, and the desire for revenge. They were highly aggressive in their attitudes to those who disagreed with them, and were ready to use violence to achieve their goals.

The dynamics of conflict depend also on conflict management mechanisms. The most important factor is the availability of mediators with the desire and authority to interfere. For example, in those communities where the local imam did not associate himself with one side of a controversy, but tried to mediate, conflict moderation was more likely. Also other actors could serve as mediators: the head of a local administration, an influential member of the diaspora, a knowledgeable Islamic student with a prestigious education - all of them were involved in mediation processes in various locations. In Karachaevo-Cherkessia, where the local *muftiat* (regional religious authority) was deeply involved in the mediation of such conflicts, radicalization among youth was less widespread than in the other regions under consideration.

The major factor pushing for conflict aggravation turned out to be the involvement of external actors with a potential for violence, enabling the spiral of violence to escalate. Violence on the one side provoked violence on the other side, with the scope of violence expanding. In such a situation, all initiatives aimed at halting the conflict could be blocked as long as both sides had resources to continue fighting.

Escalation or Moderation: Kvanada versus Tindi

Both Kvanada and Tindi are mountainous villages located in Tsumada district of Dagestan. Although no more than a dozen kilometers apart, in Kvanada the conflict escalated to a violent stage whereas in Tindi it remained in the “conflict disagreement” form.

The community of *Kvanada* had always been conservative and deeply religious. Even in the Soviet period, controversies were regulated on the basis of Sharia, not Russian law. No alcohol or cigarettes were sold in the local shops. In post-Soviet times, many youth left their home village, and the number of residents diminished. The main destination was Astrakhan, where migrants preferred to settle in one district, with many continuing to live according to the old norms. Those who stayed in the village were generally poorly educated; education was not seen as a channel for vertical mobility. There were no representatives from Kvanada in the municipal district or in republic-level power structures at the time of this author’s fieldwork.

A religious divide in the community emerged in mid-1990s with the diaspora in Astrakhan playing the leading role. All three types of religious dissidents could be observed in this conflict. Ayub, one of the most influential and radical Dagestani preachers of Kvanada origin, lived in Astrakhan. Students from Kvanada were among the first to go abroad for Islamic education, and most of them subsequently settled in Astrakhan. Young people from the village had been trained in military camps on Chechen territory; some of them may have taken part in armed confrontations.

The Islamic dissidents came regularly from Astrakhan to Kvanada, where several religious debates had been arranged, further fueling disagreements. The imam unequivocally associated himself with the traditionalists, and expressed a very aggressive position against the new ideas and their bearers. Logically, the conflict moved to the next stage: the local community became divided. The divide was deep - according to this author’s informants, only about one fourth of the residents tried to remain neutral. All the main features of the divide could be observed: *jamaat* was separated between two mosques, adherents of different Islamic views, even if relatives, stopped communicating and even greeting each other, intermarriage ceased, community coherence was weakened. Both elders and youth were divided. Traditional clan affiliations affected the new divide - for instance, members of the Ayub clan were the first to support new Islamic views. However, not all aspects of the divide can be explained on the basis of traditional community structures.

For some time the two mosques coexisted peacefully, but then the religious dissidents began aggressively offending those co-villagers who did not share their views, calling them infidels. Tensions rose, with gossip, rumors, inadequate information spreading and affecting both sides of the controversy. There were outbreaks of violence, ending in a large-scale fight with several participants injured and a car smashed. Violence continued in Astrakhan as well: one person was killed. The alternative mosque in Kvanada was destroyed. Religious dissidents from Astrakhan stopped visiting their home village; some even migrated abroad. Local dissidents continued to pray separately. With all these events the hot stage of the conflict had come to an end, but the divide had not been overcome.

In the course of the conflict there were several attempts to end the confrontation. Mainly well-educated members of the local community, including Islamic students educated abroad, initiated these attempts. However, these efforts were fruitless until 2009, when a reconciliation process was started by the head of the local municipality and by some influential members of the Astrakhan diaspora. The local imam remained opposed to this to the very end.

The specificity of the early Kvanada conflict was related to its timing - it was before the start of an intensive anti-Wahhabi campaign, while the interference of security forces had been limited. Pressure on religious dissidents was less brutal than in conflicts which occurred later.

However, there is a further aspect to this conflict. From the early 2000s, a group of underground militants had their base in a forest near the village. According to this author’s informants, several locals (mainly from Astrakhan) as well as fighters of other origin were active in this group in 2013. Kvanada residents spoke of them

with more regret than anger. The pressure from security forces was seen as the main factor that caused people to go underground.

Tindi can be classified as a fragmented community. Some residents still considered themselves as secularists and communists; others adhered more to traditional and religious norms and values. According to this author's informants, the style and the way of life of the diaspora in the Daghestani capital, Mahachkala, differed significantly from those in the local community.

Islamic revival could be observed in *Tindi*, but not all the villagers took religious norms seriously. For example, it was prohibited to sell alcohol, and a special fine was established for those who appeared drunk in public. However, locals mostly joked about it. Everybody knew that many drank alcohol brought from the district center. While in *Kvanada* community life was based on Sharia, in *Tindi* both sides in a dispute sought to find laws and regulations advantageous to them. Because of the more pragmatic attitude to religion, only few young people from *Tindi* went abroad to study Islam and not all of them completed their religious education.

Secular education in *Tindi* was considered more important than in *Kvanada*, though young informants complained about the low level of instruction in the local school. Of those who completed school, about half went on to universities, and never returned to live permanently in the village. Local people were well represented in the district-level power structures. For instance, at the time of this author's fieldwork, the head of the municipal district administration was from *Tindi*, as were several of its members.

In *Tindi*, generational hierarchies had been maintained in a very traditional form. This increased the risk of generational conflict and protest, possibly expressed through radical Islamic ideology. Young respondents from the local Islamic milieu complained about their parents. "Those adults, I think they should be blamed. They are responsible for our bad schools; they are responsible for corruption. All the mess is because of them" (young male, 2013, Dagestan). However, this risk was partly mitigated by the preservation of the clan character of local businesses and the possibilities of moving to *Makhachkala* or elsewhere where generational hierarchies were less pronounced.

Religious conflict in *Tindi* started in the second half of 1990s. According to informants consulted by the author, in 1997 about one-fifth of the local residents supported the religious dissidents, and their numbers were growing. The dissidents had prayed separately and grouped around the cousin of the prominent Dagestani radical preacher Bagaudin Kebedov. However, unlike Bagaudin, the cousin opposed the violent struggle.

In this situation of a growing divide, the local community asked a co-villager, who had been working as an imam in a locality on the plains, to return to his home village and take the lead in managing the conflict. The imam did not associate himself with either side of the confrontation, but started a dialog expressing respect and brotherly feelings towards both sides instead. As he explained in an interview, he had understood his key role and had felt responsibility for not allowing the conflict to escalate and radicalization to progress.

The sides in the conflict did not become aggressive, but expressed respect for each other. The community had already become accustomed to the differences in perspectives, and agreed to accept adherents of the new ideology as the price for community coherence. Indeed, religious dissidents in *Tindi* were characterized in quite surprising words. "Those Wahhabis, they are very mild, kind, loyal people. They are not fanatics" (middle-aged male, 2013, Dagestan). This meant that the community was *not* divided: the conflict remained frozen in the first stage, the one of "conflict disagreement." Later, in 1999, an end to the controversy was achieved, when the whole community found itself united in repelling the invaders from Chechnya.

The security forces appeared to play almost no role in the conflict in *Tindi*. This author's informants made no mentioning of any serious incidents related to their interference.

Conclusion

This analysis of Islamic conflicts in several North Caucasus villages can help researchers to adjust and utilize theoretical conflict models for investigations on the local level. Several outcomes of this study merit attention.

First, issues of power and authority are relevant for the evolution of local conflicts. However, while in deeply divided societies and in sectarian conflict theories the struggle for political power is the central point, in small communities this is more a problem of social control. The initial stage of conflict about different understandings of Islam often expressed the desire of the younger generation for emancipation from the control and authority of the elders. Struggles around local elections played almost no role in this type of local conflict. Central figures were local elders, imams, heads of influential families, much more than the heads of local municipalities.

Second, there were no unified mechanisms of mobilization for conflict and violence in the communities studied here. In some cases, mobilization was quite spontaneous and chaotic; in others, political entrepreneurs played a distinct role. Mobilization could be inspired by local actors (local imams, whose financial well-being became an issue), by members of diasporas outside a locality (religious leader living in a large Russian city) or even by the state bodies, or at least with their support. Mobilization for local conflict might differ from mobilization for violent actions, though the first at the very least creates preconditions for the second. As Scott Atran, Marc Sageman and several other scholars rightly assumed, social networks were central for mobilization here as well. [21] However, traditional networks were modified, transformed and complemented by new networks formed in the course of a conflict.

Third, in deeply divided societies and in sectarian conflict theories, conflict is usually seen as the clash of two opposing sides. However, in the conflicts studied here, old and new divides often overlapped, resulting in a more complicated conflict structure. Traditionalists could be divided because they belonged to different families or Sufi orders. Also, dissidents could be split, mainly because of diverging attitudes about the use of violence. In some cases, moderate dissidents tried hard to stop young people from becoming militants.

The analysis presented here may also serve to inform discussions on the causes and pathways to religiously motivated violence. The following factors emerged as contributing to the probability of a conflict turning violent:

1. *Local community characteristics.* In six out of eight communities with “conflict violence” in this sample, education was not important for the residents and was not considered as a path to upward mobility. Attitudes to secular education in communities with “conflict divide” and “conflict disagreement” varied greatly. However, this author’s ethnographic observations do provide indications in support of the assumption that the quality of human capital may affect the character of conflict in a local community and the attitude of its residents toward the use of violence.
2. *Context:* the social closedness of a community, rigidity of generational hierarchies, divisions existing in a community before conflict emerged, and community members’ experience of violent practices all matter. Six out of eight communities with “conflict violence” were characterized by strict generational hierarchies. In one additional case, ethnic divide contributed to the conflict evolving to a violent stage. At least for six local communities with “conflict violence,” local residents were known to have participated in violent conflicts outside the community.
3. *Mediation.* Local political entrepreneurs may act not only to aggravate, but also to moderate a conflict. That a person was available who could influence both sides and was ready to perform conflict mediation turned out to be critical for the course of conflict (including its violent potential). The position of the local imam was especially important: in seven out of eight communities with “conflict violence,” local imams either acted to promote one side of a conflict (usually traditionalists) or at least did not try to mediate or reconcile.

To conclude, in local conflicts it is often impossible to pinpoint one general cause of radicalization or of mobilization to violence. These are complicated processes that can be influenced by a range of variables. Structural and contextual factors are important, but so is agency.

Ideology, so central to debates on radicalization, remains a confusing issue. On the one hand, the Islamic views of those involved should not be ignored. Some moderate leaders of religious dissidents openly referred to their ideological preferences and the Islamic teachers they had chosen as a reason for the relatively mild state of conflict in their communities. On the other hand, ideological positions were not fixed: they could change in the course of a conflict, toward radicalization or toward moderation.

However, in none of the cases studied here could ideology provide a comprehensive explanation for the evolution of local conflict and its transformation into the violent stage. The correlation between internal violence and local residents' participation in violent conflicts outside the community proved to be far more pronounced than that between violence and "irregular" Islamic education.

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Notes

[1] The theory of deeply divided societies was proposed by Eric Nordlinger in the early 1970s (Eric A. Nordlinger, 1972, *Conflict Regulation in Deeply Divided Societies*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press). Deeply divided societies are defined as societies "driven by ethnic, national, religious, linguistic or other divisions severe enough to threaten the very existence or nature of the state, often accompanied by civil violence". (Cit. Robert C. Luskin, Ian O'Flynn, James S. Fishkin, and David Russell (2014), "Deliberation across Deep Divides," *Political Studies*, 62, p. 116.)

[2] Sectarianism is more about religious than ethnic divides, but is not identical with religious position: it is defined as "the use of religion in articulating political identities, threatening national unity and rendering conflicts more intractable as result." Teije Hidde Donker (2018), "Beyond the Spectre of Sectarianism: The Case of Tunisia," presented at the workshop "The Comparative Politics of Sub-state Identity in the Middle East," LSE Middle East Centre, June 29, 2018. URL: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2018/09/15/beyond-the-spectre-of-sectarianism-the-case-of-tunisia/> .

[3] Charles King (2004), "The Micropolitics of Social Violence," *World Politics*, 56:3, pp. 431–455; Raymond Hinnebusch (2016), "The Sectarian Revolution in the Middle East," *Revolutions: Global Trends & Regional Issues*, 4:1, pp. 120–152.

[4] Morten Valbjørn (2018), "Studying Sectarianism While Beating Dead Horses and Searching for Third Ways," presented at the workshop "The Comparative Politics of Sub-state Identity in the Middle East," LSE Middle East Centre, June 29, 2018. URL: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2018/09/17/studying-sectarianism-while-beating-dead-horses-and-searching-for-third-ways/> .

[5] Rogers Brubaker (2004), *Ethnicity without Groups*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, p. 102. For recent publications based on country case studies see, for example: Fletcher D. Cox and Timothy D. Sisk (Eds.) (2017), *Peacebuilding in Deeply Divided Societies: Toward Social Cohesion?* Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

[6] Charles King (2004), op. cit.

[7] Jürg Steiner, Maria Clara Jaramillo, Rousiley S. M. Maia and Simona Mameli (2017), *Deliberation across Deeply Divided Societies: Transformative Moments*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 9.

[8] Tone Bringa (1995), *Being Muslim the Bosnian Way: Identity and Community in a Central Bosnian Village*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; Ashutosh Varshney (2002), *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India*. 2nd ed. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press; Feargal Cochrane, Neophytos Loizides and Thibaud Bodson (2018), *Mediating Power-sharing: Devolution and Consociationalism in Deeply Divided Societies*. London: Routledge, pp. 47–79.

[9] Rogers Brubaker (2004), op.cit.

[10] For an overview and classification of early theoretical models see, for example: Jeffrey Ian Ross (1993), "Structural Causes of Oppositional Political Terrorism: Towards a Causal Model," *Journal of Peace Research*, 30:3, pp. 317–329; Brynjar Lia with Katja Skjølberg (2004), *Causes of Terrorism: An Expanded and Updated Review of the Literature*. Report prepared for Norwegian Defence Research Institute; Teun Van de Voorde (2016), "Terrorism Studies: A Critical Appraisal," in Rik Coolsaet (Ed.), *Jihadi Terrorism and the Radicalization Challenge: European and American Experiences*, 2nd edn., London: Routledge.

[11] The NYPD model is perhaps the best-known within this type of approach. See: Mitchell D. Silber and Arvin Bhatt (2007), *Radicalization in the West: The Homegrown Threat*. New York: New York City Police Department.

[12] Arun Kundnani (2015), "Radicalization: The Journey of a Concept," in Christopher Baker-Beall, Charlotte Heath-Kelly and Lee Jarvis (Eds.), *Counter-Radicalization. Critical Perspectives*. London: Routledge; Marc Sageman (2016), "The Turn to Political Violence in the West", and Hugh Roberts (2016), "Logics of Jihadi Violence in North Africa," both in Rik Coolsaet (Ed.), *Jihadi Terrorism and the Radicalization Challenge: European and American Experiences*, 2nd edn., London: Routledge; Daniel Koehler (2017), *Understanding Deradicalization. Methods, Tools and Programs for Countering Violent Extremism*, New York: Routledge.

[13] Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko (2017). "Understanding Political Radicalization: The Two-Pyramids Model," *American Psychologist*, 72:3, pp. 205–216; Bart Willem Schuurman and Max Taylor (2018), "Reconsidering Radicalization: Fanaticism and the Link between Ideas and Violence," *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 12:1, pp. 3–22; James Khalil, John Horgan and Martine Zeuthen (2019), "The Attitudes–Behaviors Corrective (ABC) Model of Violent Extremism," *Terrorism and Political Violence*. URL: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2019.1699793>.

[14] James Khalil, John Horgan and Martine Zeuthen (2019), op.cit.

[15] Bart Schuurman and Max Taylor (2018), op.cit.

[16] James Khalil, John Horgan and Martine Zeuthen (2019), op.cit.

[17] Marc Sageman (2008), *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-first Century*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, p. 70; Diane Singerman (2004), "The Networked World of Islamist Social Movements," in Quintan Wiktorowicz (Ed.), *Islamic Activism. A Social Movement Theory Approach*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press; Scott Atran (2011), *Talking to the Enemy: Violent Extremism, Sacred Value and What It Means To Be Human*, Penguin; Marc Sageman (2016), op.cit.; Zoey Reeve (2020), Islamist Terrorism as Parochial Altruism, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 32:1, pp. 38–56.

[18] Omar Ashour (2009), *The De-Radicalization of Jihadists: Transforming Armed Islamist Movements*, New York: Routledge.

[19] James Hughes, for instance, demonstrated the link between radicalization and disproportional and indiscriminate use of violence by Russian troops during the first Chechen war. James Hughes (2007). *Chechnya: from Nationalism to Jihad*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

[20] Mitchell D. Silber and Arvin Bhatt (2007), op.cit.; Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko (2008), "Mechanisms of Political Radicalization: Pathways Toward Terrorism," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 20:3, pp. 415–433; Fathali M. Moghaddam (2005), "The Staircase to Terrorism: A Psychological Exploration," *American Psychologist*, 60:2, pp.161–169; Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko (2017), op.cit.

[21] Diane Singerman (2004), op.cit.; Marc Sageman (2008), op.cit.; Scott Atran (2011), op.cit.; Marc Sageman (2016), op.cit.