

# An Islamist Challenge in Russia?

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## Brief Analysis

**T**he Chechen crisis is the result of confluence of long-term and recent political, economic and military trends in Russia. Chief among them is the decline of the Russian state, the weakness of its institutions and their inability to address the consequences of the protracted socio-economic decline in the North Caucasus--one of Russia's most disadvantaged regions. It has few natural resources, corrupt elites and a long history of opposition to Moscow's rule. The federal government's hold on the region has been tenuous at best for many years. Islam is a powerful cultural presence, but does not have a long history as a political force. Its emergence as a political force in recent years is the result of the socioeconomic conditions which have created fertile soil for efforts by various Muslim missionaries.

The current Chechen crisis was set off by a radical Chechen faction's efforts to destabilize the neighboring province of Dagestan. Russia lacks the political will, the leadership, and the resources to address the underlying causes of the problems in Dagestan and in Chechnya. The political elites are preoccupied with the struggle to succeed Boris Yeltsin, leaving the military to pursue its own objectives in Chechnya. The Russian government is fundamentally unable to address the underlying conditions that have created a breeding ground in the north Caucasus for radicalized Islam and splinter movements.

Furthermore, Russia lacks the military capability to respond to the Chechen crisis. Russia does not have the capability to deal with the terrorist campaign that the rebels have threatened to carry throughout Russia. Russian forces do not have the training and the doctrine to deal with the kinds of contingencies that the rebel campaign in Chechnya represents. The Russian military feels fully justified in the use of airstrikes. Some Russian military analysts make an analogy to the Kosovo strategy undertaken by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

All of this points to a protracted crisis in the north Caucasus that is likely to further radicalize the Chechen population. Russia itself could become an unwilling source of terrorist proliferation throughout the newly independent states and beyond. But whereas Russians see themselves as being in the same boat as the United States and Israel in facing urban terrorist bombings, there is in fact a crucial difference: Russia has not yet found the political will to begin to address the long-term problems that are the root of the terrorist campaign. Given these trends, there is little prospect for a speedy resolution of the crisis.

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Russia would like the United States to believe it is facing the same Islamic threat with which the West contends. Whenever faced with a Muslim group wanting autonomy or independence, Moscow has declared that it is confronted

with Islamic-based terror. Russia speaks of the extreme Wahhabist sect of Islam every time there are incidents linked to Islam, provoking negative associations. To be sure, it is quite possible that the bombings in Moscow were perpetrated by Muslim radical groups. But it would be incorrect to say that the main basis of the threat in the north Caucasus is Islamic-based. What Russia faces in that region is primarily a national movement with deep anti-Russian historical roots. By overemphasizing the role of Islam in these conflicts, Russia risks radicalizing the population and thereby giving a boost to Islamic radical forces.

With the breakup of the Soviet Union, the three south Caucasian republics of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia became independent states. But the only difference between these states and Chechnya was the Soviet authorities' definition of who deserved a republic versus an autonomous region. The northern Caucasus groups did not see themselves as deserving an inherently different status from that of the southern Caucasus groups; they saw themselves as separate peoples, not as part of Russia.

In Dagestan, the situation is different. Very few people would describe themselves as Dagestani. Dagestan is not an ethnic group but a territorial definition. Dagestan has about forty main ethnic groups, including Chechens. But Dagestan is strategically important to Russia because of the access it provides to the oil-rich regions of the Caspian Sea. For both these reasons, it was not surprising that the attack on targets in Dagestan provoked Russian counteractions. It is unclear how much support in Dagestan the attacks had; most clerics in Dagestan have come out against the rebel movement.

The Chechen crisis will have a varying effect on Russia's relations with Middle Eastern states:

Turkey. Many Chechen groups have offices in Turkey, home of a huge Chechen diaspora. Several Turkish groups are interested in the rights of Chechens and other groups in the north Caucasus. This will be an additional factor of tension in Russia's already troubled relations with Turkey.

Iran. The crisis in the north Caucasus will bring Russian-Iranian relations even closer. Counterintuitively, Iran has come out unequivocally in sympathy with Russia's action against Islamic groups. In fact, given the good working relationship that Russia has with Iran, Russia would like to see Iran develop ties with Islamic fringe groups in the north Caucasus so that Iran could influence and co-opt them.

Arab states. The Chechen diaspora in the Middle East is largely in Jordan and Syria. Many of those known as Circassians are Chechens. During the previous crises in Chechnya, the diaspora groups sent support to Chechen groups in the Caucasus. Such assistance from the diaspora communities is likely to continue, and this will complicate Russian relations with countries like Jordan and Syria.

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