

War in the Caucasus is raging out of control

by Konstantin George

Since Aug. 7, a full-scale war has been raging in the Russian Caucasus republic of Dagestan. Russian Army and Interior Ministry Troops have been locked in combat with up to 2,000 armed fanatics of the nominally Muslim, Wahhabite sect, drawn from various nationalities, including Chechens, Dagestanis, Arabs, Afghans, and, according to the latest reports in Russia, Pakistanis, who on Aug. 7 crossed into Dagestan in force from bases in the neighboring and, since Aug. 1996, de facto independent Caucasus republic of Chechnya.

The Wahhabite sect, dating back to the last century, is a product of British intelligence, and during the 1990s, has served as cannon fodder for the interests of the London-centered British-American-Commonwealth (BAC) faction of the financial oligarchy. This BAC faction has the strategic goal of breaking up Russia, and thus, ruining the potential formation of a “Survivors’ Club” in Eurasia centered around Russia, China, and India. Toward this end, the BAC has been instigating wars and insurrections, including in the Caucasus, the 1990s “civil war” in Tajikistan in Central Asia, the non-stop war in Afghanistan, and fomenting new crises between India and Pakistan over Kashmir.

The “combat history” of one Hattab, a Wahhabite with Jordanian citizenship who is one of the leaders of the present armed incursion into Dagestan, illustrates this. Hattab fought with the Afghan mujahideen during the 1980s against the Soviets. Then, in the 1990s, he fought successively against Russian forces, first in Tajikistan, then in Chechnya, and now in Dagestan.

As stated by Lyndon LaRouche, the ongoing implemen-

tation by this BAC crowd of a vigorous policy aimed at breaking up Russia is pushing Russia into a corner, and this entails incalculably dangerous consequences. Russia will not allow itself to be broken up, regardless of how many assets Western financial interests “own” in the Kremlin or elsewhere. The more successful the BAC drive to break up Russia becomes, the greater the risk of a massive Russian response, possibly including nuclear weapons. Already, a senior British military specialist on the Caucasus told *EIR Strategic Alert* on Aug. 17, “In the back of my mind, the idea has come up, that there is a slight possibility now, that the Russians will use tactical nuclear weapons, to stop the rebels from reaching Makhachkala [Dagestan’s capital]. That is one possibility. In theory, it would be relatively easy to stop them by [conventional] air bombardments, but the Russian forces have not been flying enough hours to accomplish this.”

Why the Caucasus is vulnerable

This drive has begun in the Caucasus, which, because of its severe economic crisis and historical background as a region filled with numerous ethnic conflicts—child’s play for the BAC crowd to manipulate—represents Russia’s most vulnerable region. The Caucasus war is doubly dangerous because, by design, it has been timed with the Aug. 9 incipient coup launched by Russian President Boris Yeltsin, through the appointment of Vladimir Putin as Prime Minister. This appointment of the man who had been handpicked by the Yeltsin clan in July 1998 to run Russia’s Security Service (FSB), was carried out to save the Yeltsin clan, an important

FIGURE 1

The Caucasus chessboard



asset maintained by the BAC in Russia. One big fear is that the new government will exploit the war in Dagestan to undertake anti-constitutional measures to keep the Yeltsin clan in power, and undercut the parliamentary elections scheduled for December and the Presidential elections set for next summer.

Russia cites British, U.S. role

Russia's Acting Minister of Nationalities, Ramazan Abdulatipov, in a press conference on Aug. 17, stated outright that what has developed in Dagestan is not a crisis, but a war. "Yes, there is a war in the Caucasus. The forces that have invaded Dagestan . . . prepared for this mission for

several years,” he said.

In an interview with *Rossiskaya Gazeta* on Aug. 14, Abdulatipov characterized the operation as a “large-scale operation coordinated and agreed at a relatively high international level. It is aimed primarily against Russia, at expelling it from the Caucasus.” He went back in history to explain the phenomenon. “The choice of location was no accident,” he said. “Back in the 18th century, it was said that whoever controls Avaristan [where heaviest fighting is going on] controls Dagestan, and whoever controls Dagestan controls the Caucasus. Everything has been calculated to remove Russia from control of the resources of the Caspian Sea and of the Caspian Basin in general.”

As to who the insurgents are, he said, “We generally refer to them as Wahhabites. However, if we dig deeper, we’ll see that they have nothing in common with Wahhabites in terms of their outlook. As a rule, these are people who have failed to find a niche in the new environment, some of these people used to be bandits and some of them have lost their way in this life, and yet some of them represent the opposition from various regions which has concentrated there. But once again, I stress that these people have nothing to do with either Islam or Allah. They call themselves the warriors of Allah, but in reality they have gone against the fundamental tenets of the Holy Koran.”

The minister emphasized that Wahhabism has been a tool of foreign imperial interest from the outset. “You may remember Al-Afghani who was supported financially from Britain and America,” he said. Al-Afghani was a Persian adventurer in the late 19th century, deployed by the British through Turkey to organize an “Islamic revolutionary movement” against Russia.

The economic dimension

Abdulatipov also identified one of the region’s crucial problems, namely, the economic devastation, above all the extremely high youth unemployment in Chechnya and Dagestan, as the key cause enabling the foreign-funded insurrection to operate: “About 80% of the young people in Dagestan’s mountainous districts where fighting is going on have been jobless for several years. These people have no hope of getting any job in the republic,” he said. “If we want to preserve the integrity of our country, we have to concentrate not on some pinpoint strikes but on the protection and security of citizens.” Regarding Dagestan, he said: “It’s a very rich republic with a huge potential. However, it is necessary to rebuild its industry and create new jobs. Otherwise, it will be a source of tension.”

A well-informed Russian source put the combined unemployment figure for Chechnya and Dagestan (obviously not counting the extensive gray and black economies in the region) at 90%. The source stressed that the major funnel for outside aid, including arms flows, to the insurrection comes

from British-allied networks in Turkey, a fact known to the Russian government, but which has not made a public issue of it for political reasons.

War and the spillover danger

When the BAC crowd chose Dagestan as a destabilization target, they hit an extremely sensitive Russian nerve. Dagestan, running north-south along the western shore of the Caspian Sea, connects the rest of Russia to Azerbaijan and, thus, to Caspian Sea oil, and because of this geographical fact, all oil pipelines from Azerbaijan run through Dagestan to the Russian Black Sea coast. Also, the connection to Azerbaijan is by definition Russia’s overland connection to Iran, a crucial strategic part of the Eurasian Land-Bridge, and Dagestan is the part of Russia which is the shortest distance, across the Caspian, from the Central Asian republics of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Dagestan also borders the breakaway Russian republic of Chechnya to the west and the independent state of Georgia to the southwest, and is thus the Russian Caucasus republic with the greatest potential for conflict to spill over into both unstable Chechnya and the volatile Transcaucasus republics of Azerbaijan and Georgia.

The spillover danger was clear on Aug. 13, when Russian planes accidentally bombed Georgian territory. During Aug. 13-16, there were two cases of a Russian armored infantry column making incursions onto Chechen territory. In both cases, the troops were called back after only a few hours in Chechnya, and threat of a resumption of the 1994-96 Chechen War (which resulted in 80,000, mostly civilian, deaths) was avoided for the time being.

Another outside (i.e., neither Russian nor Chechen) provocation occurred on Aug. 17. Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov announced that Russian forces had “invaded” Chechnya, and a huge war escalation appeared imminent. As reported by the Russian *Kommersant Daily* on Aug. 18, a few hours later, Khumid Dalayev, head of Chechnya’s border and customs services, stated that Maskhadov had been misled by a radio transmission that had been broadcast on the wavelength of the Chechen secret services, but which had emanated from outside the republic. So, a new Chechen war was again narrowly averted. But, this war danger still hangs by a thread, namely, with the survival of Maskhadov. As both London and Moscow are fully aware, if Maskhadov were to be assassinated or toppled in a coup, a new Russia-Chechen war would be unavoidable.

A spillover into Chechnya would be doubly tragic, because President Maskhadov is a moderate who has stressed that the renewed Caucasus war in Dagestan is a plot, the result of collusion between Western interests and what he calls “the party of war” in Moscow, consisting of those Russians who work hand in glove with Western financial interests. Maskhadov has also stressed that he and the Chechen government not only have nothing to do with the insurgents, but are open to

collaborating with Russia against them, as these foreign-run fanatics pose as great a threat to Chechnya as to Russia.

A widening of the crisis into the Transcaucasus is an even worse nightmare, one that could entail a direct crisis with NATO, which both Georgia and Azerbaijan are hoping to join. Azerbaijan, since January of this year, has even gone so far as to request that NATO, U.S., or Turkish military bases be established on its territory. The BAC has selected Turkey as its launching pad for operations into the region. Aid, including arms and recruits, has been channeled into the Caucasus through the territory of NATO member Turkey, involving networks there.

Escalation of the Dagestan insurrection is also unpredictable. Within Dagestan, the Wahhabite insurgents enjoy almost no public support. This phenomenon is in contrast to the 1994-96 Chechen War, where the insurgents enjoyed wide support from the Chechen population because of a number of historical and recent factors which do not apply to the Dagestan situation (for example, under Stalin the Dagestanis never suffered near genocidal repression and mass deaths and mass deportations to Central Asia, as did the Chechens).

However, Dagestan is a smorgasbord of nationalities, and given the extremely bleak economic situation, there is a great latent potential for inter-ethnic clashes. Should the insurrection in Dagestan trigger ethnic conflicts—since Dagestan is both extremely multi-ethnic, whose ethnic pattern overlaps with that of neighboring Azerbaijan—then an insurrection say, of a group like the Lezgins, could erupt, involving both Dagestan and Azerbaijan. This could be the pretext for Azerbaijan to call on NATO for help, creating a potential direct superpower clash in the Caucasus.

Coming back to the point made by Chechen President Maskhadov—that the war is the result of a dangerous collusion between Western interests and the subservient to the West “party of war” faction in Moscow. This can be seen in the timing of events. As President Maskhadov has stressed, the war serves the interests of the Western-allied “party of war” in Russia. On the day of the Yeltsin-Putin coup, the Wahhabite insurgents issued the following proclamation: “We, the Muslims of Dagestan, officially declare the restoration of independence to the Islamic State of Dagestan.” The declaration called on “all Muslims” to help Dagestan get rid of Russian “occupants.” The insurgents called on a notorious Chechen terrorist, Shamil Basayev, to head up their “state.”

Putin, in his first statement on the crisis in Dagestan, announced that he would restore “order and discipline” to Dagestan. “We are facing the emergence of mass terror on Russia’s southern border,” he said. “The situation in Dagestan will return to normal within a week and a half to two weeks.” No serious observer thinks so, because there are up to 2,000 Wahhabites lodged in the remote mountainous areas of Dagestan, and, even if by some miracle, they could all be

driven from Dagestan within “two weeks,” they would simply fall back to Chechen territory, regroup, and re-enter Dagestan. Since Aug. 9, they have come under heavy, non-stop bombardment by Russian artillery and helicopter gunships.

The policy of the Yeltsin family and Putin is to embark on military escalation to steer the domestic political situation into an extra-constitutional mode. The Aug. 13 Putin statement that Russian planes would bomb inside Chechnya brought the situation to the edge of a second Chechen war as well. As in the case of the Russian troop incursions into Chechnya, only to be followed by their withdrawal, this threat has not been acted on, reflecting—despite, or because of the Yeltsin family problem—the fact that key elements in the Russian military are refusing to go along with an escalation. Confirmation that the Russian military does not want to draw Chechnya, Georgia, and Azerbaijan into the crisis, was provided on Aug. 17 by Gen. Viktor Kazantsev, Commander of the North Caucasus Military District. He reported that a new offensive against the rebels was about to begin, with the aim of killing them where they are (the mountains of Dagestan) and “not chasing them from Dagestan,” i.e., there is no plan for “hot pursuit” into Chechnya or elsewhere.

General Kazantsev’s statements followed a meeting between Yeltsin and Defense Minister Igor Sergeev, where it was decided that command of all Dagestan operations would be taken away from the Interior Ministry and given to the Defense Ministry. On Aug. 18, Sergeev led a team of generals from the General Staff, the Defense Ministry, and the Interior Ministry to the Dagestan capital, Makhachkala, for war-planning sessions with General Kazantsev and Dagestan’s State Council and Security Council. On that day, Russian forces captured the strategic mountain pass at Kharami on the Chechen-Dagestan border, thus cutting off the rebels in the Botlikh area of Dagestan from any retreat back into Chechnya. However, if the Russian forces to the south of Botlikh are weak, or inept, or both, then the rebels could escape into Georgia or Azerbaijan. This would present for the first time a rebel force using sanctuaries in either country to stage attacks on Dagestan, i.e., Russian territory. Precisely such a danger was warned about in *Izvestia* on Aug. 18.

The evolution of the military situation to where the main force of rebels were to operate against Russia from the Transcaucasus, the ever-present danger of a new war in Chechnya, and the problem that Yeltsin and Putin remain in power, makes the crisis very dangerous. Even though war has been averted so far, Maskhadov has been forced because of Putin’s threats to impose a one-month state of emergency, with a partial mobilization of reservists and veterans of the Chechen War. He again blamed the “party of war” in Moscow for having created “the threat of a new war in the Caucasus.” How far and how fast this war will escalate, and how this will affect the situation in Moscow and other key world capitals, are crucial questions.