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RUSSIA: Did Kabardino-Balkaria authorities stoke Islamist threat?

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18 News Service <<http://www.forum18.org>>

The authorities in the North Caucasus republic of Kabardino-Balkaria have deliberately inflated the threat from Islamic extremism, local people in the capital, Nalchik, have told Forum 18 News Service. "If only five per cent of the population understand Islam (..) you can't go out on the streets and create an Islamic state," one local Muslim pointed out. By exaggerating the threat, they suggested, local officials are able to secure anti-terrorism funding from the Kremlin, divert public attention away from the republic's systemic corruption and poor economic performance, and keep people too afraid to protest. A former contender for the Kabardino-Balkaria presidency has documented the questionable speed with which the alleged Islamist threat appeared in the republic. Local Muslims claim the state persecuted ordinary mosque-goers on the pretext of fighting Islamic extremism, but local state representatives insist the threat is genuine. "There are still people trying to destabilise the situation with extremist ideology," one official dealing with religious affairs assured Forum 18.

The authorities in the North Caucasus republic of Kabardino-Balkaria have deliberately inflated the threat from Islamic extremism, local people have maintained to Forum 18 News Service recently in the capital, Nalchik. While republican officials insist the threat is genuine, local Muslims claim the state engaged in indiscriminate persecution of ordinary mosque-goers on the pretext of fighting Islamic extremism.

While it would not be right to say there are no ideological forces supporting jihad [Arabic: struggle, commonly understood as holy war] in the local Muslim community, "they were - and probably still are - very weak," local human rights activist Valeri Khatazhukov told Forum 18 in Nalchik on 24 July. Kabardino-Balkaria has no tradition of using Islam for political purposes, he pointed out. But under late President Valeri Kokov, the republic's authorities "saw that it was advantageous to have an Islamist problem".

Local Muslim Ali Pshigotzyhev agrees. "The special services earn a crust when there is work. If there isn't any, their bosses will tell them they're getting money for nothing, and they won't get stars [indicating senior rank on epaulettes]." Thus, if there are only three "Wahhabi" organisations, he told Forum 18 on 24 July, "that's not so scary. But if there are 30, the Kremlin needs to allot an appropriate sum to the struggle against them."

"Wahhabism" is a loose term for Islamic extremism commonly used in Russia and Central Asia (see F18News 8 August 2007 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1004>).

Ali Pshigotzyhev's family has been adversely affected by Kabardino-Balkaria's treatment of Muslims in a number of ways (see F18News 21 August 2008 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1175>).

Local lawyer Magomed Abubakarov, an ethnic Chechen, also suggested to Forum 18 that the authorities in Kabardino-Balkaria inflated the Islamist threat in order to increase their funding and powers. "Across the whole North Caucasus there is a war on terror," he remarked on 24 July. "How could it not be happening in Nalchik?"

A 1990s dispute over Islamic practice resulted in Kabardino-Balkaria's Muslim Spiritual Directorate branding the rival jamaat [Arabic: assembly or congregation] "Wahhabi" extremists (see F18News 26 August 2008 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1178>).

In a 2003-5 state crackdown, young mosque-goers reported being blacklisted as "Wahhabis" by police and subjected to beatings and more severe torture (see F18News 19 August <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1172> and 20 August 2008 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1173>).

The crackdown culminated in the failed October 2005 Nalchik uprising, in which 144 people were killed and over 100 wounded. Some of those now detained as suspects claim they were arrested due to their faith and gave confessions under duress (see F18News 18 August 2008 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1171>).

Local Muslims believe the uprising was instigated by desperate young men at the end of their tether after sustained and brutal

persecution by the state authorities (see F18News 28 August 2008 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1180>).

Local officials dealing with religious affairs and a senior detention centre administrator have denied reports of abuse to Forum 18 (see F18News 18 August 2008 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1171> and 19 August 2008 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1172>).

Albert Kazharov - who stood against Valeri Kokov in the 2002 republican presidential elections - traces the questionable appearance of a local Islamist threat in the December 2005 issue of a news bulletin produced by Khatazhukov's Kabardino-Balkaria Public Human Rights Centre.

In November 2001, notes Kazharov, the republic's organised crime police department reported it had information that an Abkhazia-based Chechen militant group had contacts in Kabardino-Balkaria, but did not have specific names and addresses. Just three months later, however - and a week after President Kokov stressed the importance of the fight against terrorism and extremism in his March 2002 parliamentary address - Nalchik Public Prosecutor Anatoli Tkhabapsoyev announced that there were "more than 70 fervent adherents of Wahhabism in Nalchik. The law enforcement agencies know their names and are monitoring their activities using lawful means."

How, asks Kazharov, could the republic's law enforcement agencies be conducting such a "valiant criminal investigation into 'religious and political extremism'," when the local FSB security service had just come under fire for bringing only 8 criminal cases to court in 2001?

At a July 2002 meeting of Kabardino-Balkaria's law enforcement agencies, Kazharov continues, FSB and public prosecutor's office representatives slammed serious corruption within the Interior Ministry. The response by then Interior Minister Khachim Shogenov focused on his department's successful fight against religious extremism, noting that, "43 active Wahhabis have been brought to justice, a further 21 are sought."

At an Interior Ministry briefing in early 2003, however, Ruslan Nakhushev - an ex-KGB officer and then Director of the unregistered and now defunct Kabardino-Balkaria Islamic Research Institute - maintained that no one had in fact been prosecuted for religious extremism, despite efforts by the law enforcement agencies to combat it over the past few years. "This either means that the competency of the relevant state organs is open to doubt," Nakhushev concluded, "or that the target [of their offensive] quite simply does not exist."

Later placed at the top of a police "Wahhabi list", Nakhushev disappeared in mysterious circumstances on 4 November 2005 (see 20 August 2008 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1173>). The Institute's assistant directors, Anzor Astemirov and Musa Mukozhev, were also at the top of the list and are still wanted by police (see F18News 28 August 2008 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1180>).

Similar to Albert Kazharov, Valeri Khatazhukov drew Forum 18's attention to a prominent Islamist threat as a possible way of diverting public - and Kremlin - attention away from Kabardino-Balkaria's systemic corruption and weak economy.

Arsen Mokayev - the brother of one of those detained on suspicion of taking part in the failed 2005 uprising - illustrated the chronic nature of these problems. "There are 50 or 60 Porsche Cayenne jeeps - which cost 140,000 dollars - here," he pointed out to Forum 18 on 25 July. At the same time, he added, the authorities recently trumpeted a rise in child benefit from 70 roubles (15 Norwegian Kroner, 2 Euros or 3 US Dollars) to 140 roubles (30 Norwegian Kroner, 4 Euros or 6 US Dollars). "Who can support a child on 140 roubles a month? One Pampers costs 10 roubles."

An Islamist threat "also keeps people afraid," Ali Pshigotyzhev pointed out to Forum 18. After an abrupt encounter with an armed personnel carrier filled with Russian soldiers in the otherwise sleepy outlying Nalchik suburb of Khasanya on 25 July, Forum 18's taxi driver explained their presence was due to "terrorists" in the surrounding wooded hills. Asked if this was really the case, he replied, "Well, that's what people say."

Asked whether there are any areas of Kabardino-Balkaria too dangerous to enter due to a terrorist presence, an ethnic Balkar soldier serving in a military mountain patrol said there were not. "The Chechens attacked Nalchik," he explained to Forum 18 on 26 July - referring to the failed 2005 uprising - "but we showed them."

"Officials argue that people wanted to create a caliphate [Islamic state] in the Caucasus," Pshigotyzhev remarked to Forum 18, "but before you can do that, you need to create one in people's hearts. If only five per cent of the population understand Islam, you can't do anything by force or with guns. You can't go out on the streets and create an Islamic state - and the young people understand that's stupid."

Other local Muslims also thought that young Muslims disillusioned with the regime in Kabardino-Balkaria - even if they took part in the failed 2005 uprising - posed no real threat. "They weren't idiots, they understood that they couldn't do anything to fight what was going on," the mother of two young Muslims killed in the uprising told Forum 18 on 23 July.

"There is no caliphate anywhere in the world - so how can a great power such as Russia really believe it is forming within it?" former imam Arsen Tukov laughed to Forum 18 on 23 July.

On the contrary, the state authorities are aware that the threat is at a level which is easy to crush, as proved the case in October 2005, Pshigotyzhev insisted to Forum 18.

Valeri Khatazhukov, the local human rights activist, did not write off the problem of Islamic extremism completely, however. While there are some 50 Islamic militants in Kabardino-Balkaria (population 900,000), he estimated, "that's a lot - especially for our republic." The IRA (Irish Republican Army) was able to mount a serious terrorist campaign with only around 100 active members, he maintained.

While no definitive figures exist, estimates spanning 1978-2002 by the British army, Professor Richard English and journalists Brendan O'Brien and Ed Moloney put the number of active IRA members (as opposed to supporters or sympathisers) at 2-300.

The most senior official fighting religious extremism at Kabardino-Balkaria's Organised Crime Police Department, Anatoli Kyarov was assassinated in central Nalchik on 12 January 2008, Valeri Khatazhukov also pointed out to Forum 18. The Caucasus Front of Islamic militants, whose unit in Kabardino-Balkaria is known as Yarmuk, claimed responsibility on 13 January. "It was astonishing that they managed to do it," remarked Khatazhukov. "This means they have money and the ability to organise, that there is a professional underground here skilled in conspiracy."

Anzor Astemirov - a former assistant director of the Islamic Research Institute - reportedly now heads Yarmuk as "Sayfullah". In an internet video address dated autumn 2007, Sayfullah closely resembles the photograph of Anzor Astemirov on the Russian police's wanted

list (see F18News 28 August 2008 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1180>).

Insisting that the threat from Islamic extremism is genuine, officials from Kabardino-Balkaria Parliament's Committee for Youth Affairs and Social Organisations estimated to Forum 18 on 25 July that there are up to 100 Islamic militants in the republic, and a further 3-4,000 sympathisers.

Brushing aside locals' claims that state persecution of Muslims might have triggered the problem, Committee chairman Boris Pashtov proceeded to sketch Forum 18 a diagram of how he saw the situation. "Number one - there has to be the necessary social-economic conditions. Unemployment, poverty, discontent. There is always a group - like these young people - discontent when the economic situation is worsening, or improving, as it is right now in Kabardino-Balkaria."

"The second factor is the idea," Pashtov continued. "This idea of Islam isn't actually Islam. Boulevard Marxism, I call it. They call it Islam, call each other 'brother Muslims', but it's about building a classless society. It's upturned, distorted communism, and it couldn't be otherwise, because 99 per cent of them don't understand Arabic. But they all heard about communism."

For these two things to come together, as in the failed 2005 Nalchik uprising, Pashtov told Forum 18, "You need a detonator: Shamil Basayev." Chechen warlord Basayev claimed overall command of the attack in a 17 October 2005 statement.

Today, according to Pashtov's colleague, Dzhambulat Gergokov, "the ideological element is reduced, but there are still people trying to destabilise the situation with extremist ideology."

Nalchik lawyer Larisa Dorogova takes a more sombre view. "The more people who are killed in the Caucasus, the better for politicians," she remarked to Forum 18 on 23 July. "That's the conclusion we've come to." (END)

For a personal commentary by Irina Budkina, editor of the <<http://www.samstar.ru>> Old Believer website, about continuing denial of equality to Russia's religious minorities, see F18News 26 May 2005 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=570>.

For more background see Forum 18's Russia religious freedom survey at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=947>.

Reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Russia can be found at <<http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=10>>.

A printer-friendly map of Russia is available at <<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=russi>>.

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