

# Violence escalates in Dagestan amid incipient Islamist insurgency

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Russia's north Caucasus is wracked by ongoing violence centered in the federal republic of Dagestan. Home to nearly three million people, the geostrategically important region is becoming the focal point of a low-level Islamist insurgency that has spilled over from neighboring Chechnya.

The Kremlin is increasingly concerned about the links between militants of this separatist movement and the Islamist jihadists playing the leading role in the US-backed proxy war in Syria.

Dagestan and the north Caucasus are essential to Russian economic and geostrategic interests. Major pipeline routes crisscross the region. Dagestan itself has large proven reserves of oil and natural gas, and the seaport in its capital is Russia's only ice-free port on the Caspian Sea—a key point for maritime trade between Russia and the four other countries bordering the Caspian. Were Russia to lose control of the region, not only would important trade routes be disrupted, but Russian rights to Caspian Sea oil reserves could be challenged.

This month, dozens have been killed or injured in bombings and shootings in Dagestan, with violence occurring on a nearly daily basis. In early August, nine people were injured in a blast in Makhachkala, the republic's capital city. Federal security services then found and dismantled a second explosive device nearby.

The day before the blast in the capital, three police officers were injured and one killed in an attack in the Kayakentsky region of Dagestan.

On August 4, Sufi imam Ilyas Ilyasov was murdered in his car, in one of a string of attacks against moderate Muslim leaders in the region. So far this year, three religious officials have been killed in Dagestan, on top of eight in 2012. Ilyasov's slaying followed the

shooting of Rabbi Ovadia Isakov in late July.

The latest violence is part of what one commentator has described as Dagestan's "hot summer." In June, 19 people died in a series of attacks, including one attempted double suicide bombing. In May, 59 were injured in a major blast. Last year, over 400 people were killed in the region.

While partly connected to the drug trade, ongoing violence is also driven by a burgeoning Islamic insurgency around a group called the Caucasus Emirate. The goal of the organization, whose roots go back to the separatist movement in Chechnya, is to set up an independent Islamic Caliphate in the region. The group's leader, Doku Umarov, recently issued a public call for attacks on the 2014 Olympic Games, which will be held in Sochi, Russia, just a few hundred miles away.

This intensifying violence comes amidst growing concerns in Russia that the US-backed civil war in Syria is fueling the Islamist insurgencies in the region. Militants from Chechnya and Dagestan, as well as other majority-Muslim areas along Russia's borders, are active in the ranks of the anti-Assad forces.

In July, the Obama administration announced that it would openly and directly supply arms to opposition fighters in Syria. The Kremlin fears that these weapons and training poured into the conflict are finding their way to Islamist forces in the north Caucasus.

A recent article in the newspaper *Kommersant* reported that over 100 Chechens are active in the Syrian war. Usman Ferzauli, a leading figure in the Chechen separatist movement, stated that the Caucasus Emirate plays a key role in recruiting north Caucasus militants to fight in the Middle East. Last year, the son of well-known Chechen warlord Ruslan Gelayev was killed while fighting alongside the anti-Assad

opposition. Most recently, in retaliation for the capture of one of their top commanders, the Chechen Abu Musab, Syrian “rebels” unleashed a reign of violence on Kurdish civilians, beheading several and seizing hundreds more as hostages.

According to Andrei Konin, head of the regional division of the FSB (Russia’s security service), around 200 residents of Dagestan are currently in Syria, including an unspecified number of them active in the opposition. He said that the central issue facing the FSB was preventing the further flow of youth from Dagestan into Syria.

In late July, government agents in Dagestan reportedly detained a local man returning to the region after having been injured while fighting alongside anti-Assad forces in Syria.

Speaking after a meeting of the Anti-terrorism Commission of Dagestan in July, Ramazan Abdulatipov, head of the Republic, expressed the fears of the Russian ruling elite. “Dagestanis battling today in Syria will return tomorrow to the republic [of Dagestan]...and do battle with the Russian authorities,” he remarked.

Referring to measures taken by Vladimir Putin in the late 1990s and early 2000s to crush the Islamic separatist movement in neighboring Chechnya, Abdulatipov made clear that the Russian state is prepared to respond to the threats facing the north Caucasus with force. He then proceeded to dissolve the Dagestani cabinet, charging it with ineffectiveness largely for failing to stem the growing tide of violence in the republic.

Local residents report an intensification of antiterror raids in Dagestan, with Russian security services harassing young men in particular. However, the brutality of the government crackdown generally serves to increase young people’s sympathy for the local insurgency.

Islamist militants are not only flowing to Syria from Russia. In April, an article on *EurasiaNet.org* reported that young men from Kyrgyzstan are making their way to Syria.

A June report in the newspaper *Vesti* stated that a Turkmen citizen, who had been fighting with the Al-Qaeda-aligned Al-Nusra front, had been captured by government forces near the Syrian city of Aleppo. The International Center for the Study of Radicalization in

London told *EurasiaNet.org* that they had heard reports of fighters from a number of former Soviet Central Asian states, including Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan.

Moscow views the arming of the Syrian “rebels” by the United States and its allies as a direct threat to its interests. The Kremlin’s anxiety over this question is intensified by the looming drawdown of US forces in Afghanistan, which Moscow fears will turn into yet another breeding ground for Islamist insurgency in Central Asia.

The growth of an increasingly well-trained, well-armed and experienced militant Islamist movement inside Russia and throughout the former Soviet sphere poses significant dangers for Russia. Beyond the loss of control of the north Caucasus and vital trade and oil routes, the Kremlin faces the prospect of hostile or unstable regimes all along its southern border. Furthermore, since Russia itself has a large native-born and immigrant Muslim population, any increase in separatist or Islamist sentiment in this population could destabilize the entire country.

In addition, large refugee populations fleeing violence in Syria are having a deeply destabilizing impact on the ex-USSR. Syria has large diaspora communities with historic claims to territory in Russia and adjoining states. Some have already begun moving back to these “homelands,” including the disputed territories of Abkhazia on the Russian-Georgian border and Nagorno-Karabakh on the Armenian-Azeri border.

Some Russian republics in the north Caucasus have allowed small numbers of Syrian Circassians to seek refuge in their borders, but the Russian government has so far resisted any larger influx, which could fundamentally change the demographics of the region. In his appeal to unleash violence on the 2014 Olympic Games in Sochi, Doku Umarov, the leader of the jihadist Caucasus Emirate, sought to appeal to nationalist and Islamist sentiments within the Caucasus diaspora community, calling for a defense of “the bones of our ancestors.”



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