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RUSSIA: Did Kabardino-Balkaria authorities turn peaceful Muslims into terrorists?

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

Sustained and brutal state persecution of Muslims in the North Caucasus republic of Kabardino-Balkaria has pushed some into terrorist activity, Forum 18 News Service has been told in the regional capital Nalchik. Two popular Islamic preachers now wanted by police in connection with a failed 2005 uprising in the capital used to advocate non-violence, local Muslims said. Reports suggest that at least one began launching armed attacks against the state authorities by late 2004. Republican officials – who have denied reports of abuse – claimed to Forum 18 that the pair were conducting "military-methodological preparations" from the beginning, but could not be convicted due to insufficient evidence.

State persecution of independent Muslims in the North Caucasus republic of Kabardino-Balkaria drove some towards terrorism, local Muslims have insisted to Forum 18 News Service. It is no longer possible to say definitively if this is indeed the case.

Key figures in the progression are Anzor Astemirov and Musa Mukozhev, leaders of Kabardino-Balkaria's independent jamaat [Arabic: assembly or congregation] and assistant directors of the republic's unregistered, now defunct Islamic Research Institute.

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

"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).

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).

Anzor Astemirov and Musa Mukozhev were at the top of the republican authorities' list of 400 alleged Islamic extremists. They are still wanted by police.

Earlier associates of the pair – unaware of their present whereabouts – have maintained to Forum 18 that they were not radical, but simply sought to encourage an observant Islamic way of life in Kabardino-Balkaria.

Astemirov was "a very good guy, not a Wahhabi, very intellectual, clever; it was possible to talk with him," Moscow-based Islam specialist Aleksei Malashenko told Forum 18 on 16 July. He believes Astemirov and Mukozhev – whom he met in Nalchik in 2002 – were killed in or after the 2005 uprising, "but no one has seen any bodies."

In Kabardino-Balkaria's capital, Nalchik, local Muslim Ali Pshigotyzhev has no idea what happened to the pair, whom he knew well. Unfamiliar with the internet, he suggested to Forum 18 on 24 July that they might be in hiding, possibly abroad.

Mukozhev was "an emir [commander] of the youth," Pshigotyzhev told Forum 18. Although the FSB security service would observe and record his hugely popular sermons at Nalchik's Volny Aul mosque, he said, "There was nothing for them to take issue with. Musa didn't say anything bad – everything was on the record – he even stressed that the main thing was to be not in conflict with the state. He said that we live in this state, have the right to pray and so should just pray and spread Islam, as there are so many ignorant people." Mukozhev also spoke against calls for jihad [Arabic: struggle, commonly understood as holy war] and taking up arms, added Pshigotyzhev. "He said, 'No, this is a provocation!'"

Volny Aul mosque was one of six closed down in Nalchik during the 2003-5 crackdown (see F18News 19 August 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1172).

Astemirov "wasn't and didn't become a terrorist. He wasn't bloodthirsty, like the anti-Muslim people say," Pshigotyzhev suggested to Forum 18. "On the contrary, he – and Musa – taught Arabic and Islam. The young people loved them and will continue to do so, too."

Ali Pshigotyzhev'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).

Nalchik lawyer Larisa Dorogova defended the religious freedom of jamaat members during the 2003-5 state crackdown. She submitted a registration application for the Islamic Research Institute, "but the authorities wouldn't even accept the documents." Jamaat leaders "brought me petitions and the results of medical check-ups after they were beaten up, and we wrote complaints in their name," she told Forum 18 on 23 July. In 2004, Dorogova drafted a letter from 150 jamaat members and family members – some 400 people in all – asking various state departments for permission to leave Russia. "I didn't know who to appeal to, so it wasn't addressed to any particular country," she added.

Dorogova is no longer in contact with jamaat members, but believes some were killed in or arrested after the failed 2005 uprising. She does not know what happened to Astemirov and Mukozhev.

"We are going to defend ourselves, but only by any lawful means available to us," Musa Mukozhev told local human rights activist Valeri Khatazhukov in a 9 October 2003 article on the state crackdown for the Institute for War and Peace Reporting. "I truly hope that the president of our republic, as guarantor of our constitution, will not leave this situation unattended, and will take all steps necessary to protect us from unchecked police brutality."

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).

By late 2004, some jamaat members were becoming frustrated. "Even though not one of the accusations against our community has been proven, we have no access to justice," Mukozhev told local journalist Fatima Tlisova in a 29 September 2004 Institute for War and Peace Reporting interview. "The Muslims of Kabardino-Balkaria are completely deprived of their constitutional rights and civil liberties. It is very difficult for us to keep our young people from taking retaliation."

Blame for the bloody October 2005 Nalchik uprising has since been apportioned to the jamaat and Yarmuk – a group of an estimated several dozen local Islamic militants based in Kabardino-Balkaria and founded by Muslim Atayev, nicknamed Sayfullah.

While Yarmuk "had radical demands from the very beginning," Aleksei Malashenko commented shortly after the failed uprising to Russian daily newspaper Gazeta, the jamaat "functioned openly – Musa Mukozhev and Anzor Astemirov were sensible and educated people, founded the Islamic Research Institute, and in response they were persecuted, arrested, beaten up in mosques. Now these guys – well-meaning even a year ago – are accused of organising an uprising. Perhaps over the past five years some have been pushed to a point where they'd take up arms."

Local people generally acknowledge that some ordinary Muslims did take part in the uprising. "It's hardly surprising," the mother of one detainee suspected of participation in the attack remarked to Forum 18 on 23 July. "After having his ribs broken repeatedly, being raped with a truncheon, what would any man's response be?"

"Every person has a limit to their patience," Arsen Mokayev, whose brother is similarly detained, explained to Forum 18 on 25 July. "You have a boss, an editor, for example. If he yells at you one, two or three times, you'll tolerate it. Maybe ten times. If he yells at you eleven times, you'll tell him where to go, tell him to stuff his job and quit. This is just the same – the patience of those 150 guys who went onto the streets had run out."

Asked on 25 July whether Astemirov and Mukozhev were extremists, Boris Pashtov, who heads Kabardino-Balkaria Parliament's Committee for Youth Affairs and Social Organisations, initially told Forum 18 he was unsure. "But they were radical – they wanted 'correct' Islam, to change everything." His colleague Dzhambulat Gergokov, who heads the Committee's religious affairs section, pointed out that the pair were arrested several times - "they were found to have field radio stations, camouflage uniforms" – but that no case could be made against them.

Pashtov then accused Astemirov and Mukozhev of conducting "military-methodological preparations" parallel to their religious activity. "If you're just involved in Islam, why train snipers? Why do you need weapons if you're an institute?" He also acknowledged that there had been insufficient evidence to convict the pair, however, who are still somewhere in Kabardino-Balkaria, he believes.

Mufti Anas Pshikhachev of the republic's Muslim Spiritual Directorate rubbished the Islamic Research Institute, and maintained that both Astemirov and Mukozhev had failed to complete any Islamic education abroad. "I knew them and their so-called institute very well – such a beautiful name, but an institute should have doctors and professors in order to conduct Islamic research, and anyone with educational qualifications is with us." Jamaat members were all "dissatisfied with something, offended, had family problems or were ex-criminals," he remarked. "What they wanted was unclear, but some who wanted to profess Islam actively were used to destabilise the situation in Kabardino-Balkaria and, through that, Russia."

On 23 September 2006, Musa Mukozhev issued a statement maintaining that his previous tactic of "peaceful coexistence between the government and the jamaat" was a mistake, according to a 28 June 2008 North Caucasus Weekly report by Fatima Tlisova. "When our jamaat was formed, we tried to find a 'golden mean' and combine a call for peace with jihad," he wrote. "In reality, this was not a golden mean, but an attempt to combine two contradictory things – peace and war."

According to the same report, Anzor Astemirov – now titled Sayfullah as Yarmuk's leader after the death of Atayev - claimed responsibility for organising an armed raid on the office of Kabardino-Balkaria's Narcotics Police in December 2004. Four police officers were killed and a large cache of weapons seized in the attack.

In an internet video address dated autumn 2007, Sayfullah closely resembles the photograph of Anzor Astemirov on the Russian police's wanted list. All those who refuse to submit to the law of Allah are kafirs [infidels], he maintains, and condemns their 2007 preparations for the 450th celebration of the "so-called voluntary incorporation of Kabardino-Balkaria into Russia". Referring to his ongoing preparation of armed operations against the Russian state on the territory of the republic, he appeals to every Muslim in Kabardino-Balkaria to make a choice. "Support Muslims and take part in jihad, or support kafirs and betray your faith. There is no third way." (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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