

*Center for Strategic and International Studies  
Russia and Eurasia Program*

**Getting the Caucasus Emirate Right**

September 28, 2011

**Speakers:**

Dr. Gordon Hahn, *Professor, Monterey Institute of International Studies*

Lt. Col. Robert Schaefer, *Chief, Central and South Asia Branch, International Military Affairs at U.S. Army Central Command*

**Moderator:**

Dr. Andrew Kuchins, *Director and Senior Fellow, CSIS Russia and Eurasia Program*

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**Dr. Gordon Hahn**

Dr. Gordon Hahn began his remarks by outlining his three main contributions to the study of jihadism in the North Caucasus: (1) identifying the links between the Caucasus Emirate (CE) and Al-Qaeda, (2) demonstrating the importance of the CE as an organized political and military force, and (3) emphasizing the significance of local culture and jihadist ideology in driving the violence in the North Caucasus.

Hahn proceeded to note various connections between the CE and Al-Qaeda. Numerous jihadist websites have been created in the CE that call for a global jihad, laud international jihadist figures, attempt to bolster mujahedeen recruitment and coordinate terrorist attacks. Several Al-Qaeda websites sympathize with the Muslim struggle in the North Caucasus, calling for Muslims worldwide to support their cause. Islamist leaders regularly fill speeches with calls for the CE to join efforts to create the Caliphate. Intelligence has also discovered a number of terrorist plots jointly planned by CE jihadists associated with Al-Qaeda operatives. It is apparent that Al-Qaeda operatives have been working in the Caucasus and Caucasian jihadists in Afghanistan and Pakistan, indicating that the CE has been absorbed into the global jihadist network. Furthermore, U.S. documents clearly demonstrate financial ties between Al-Qaeda and the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria dating back to the 1990s with the coming of Emir Ibn Al-Khattab to Chechnya.

Many critics claim an alliance between Al-Qaeda and the CE does not exist and that jihadism in the Caucasus consists primarily of “false flag” operations. However, Hahn argued that these are the very people who previously maintained that jihadism was marginal or nonexistent in the

Caucasus. Many of these scholars and observers have selectively picked statements from leaders like Umarov in an attempt to demonstrate that the CE is fighting primarily for ethno-nationalist reasons. Many of these same analysts suffer from a “Chechen-centric” evaluation of the conflict, failing to see the violence in other regions like Ingushetia and Dagestan as part of the same jihadist phenomenon.

To understand the conflict more clearly, two major misconceptions about the CE must be addressed. The first misconception is that there is no centralized political-military force in the CE, but rather a group of inchoate local cells using the ideology of jihad as a venue for their goal of carrying out criminal attacks. While the organization is decentralized, as terrorist networks tend to be out of necessity, the system is still largely coordinated by top-level leaders like Umarov who coordinate activities among a variety of ethnicities and regions. The second misconception is that the conflict is an ethno-nationalist movement, predominantly driven in Chechnya by separatists. However, nationalism has clearly taken a back-seat to the jihadist movement in the organization of violence in the CE. No jamaats are formed on an ethnic basing, but rather all are based upon religious ideology. Many tried to claim that Chechnya’s split from Umarov and the CE indicated its true ethno-nationalist aims, however the later return of Chechnya to the CE clearly indicates that Chechnya had acted in opposition to Umarov’s leadership, not in a rejection to the jihadist movement.

Causality in the conflict is another area of controversy. Many overemphasize “single factor” explanations of the violence, clouding a proper understanding of issues. A variety of factors are involved in spurring the jihadization of the CE: a history of colonialism, poor Russian governance, brutality by Russian and local security forces, the independent nature of the local mountain culture, traditions of blood-feuds, poor socioeconomic conditions, and the presence of Salafist ideology. There is no evidence that any one of these factors is the primary cause of conflict. Furthermore, while many factors have driven the people of the Caucasus to participate in violent insurrection, one must recognize there are a number of non-jihadist ideologies they could have chosen to rally behind. It is thus important to address the issue of why these individuals chose to subscribe particularly to an Islamist ideology, which clearly drives the strategic decisions of the CE leadership and the motivations of the rank-and-file members.

It is quite evident that the CE is a viable political organization worth deeper study. More analysts must give serious credence to the ideological basis of violence in the CE rather than simply grouping the North Caucasus violence as another insurgent movement, in order to fully understand the violence and jihadist trends that have emerged.

#### **Lt. Col. Robert Schaefer**

Lt. Col. Robert Schaefer began by noting that he could agree with everything stated by Hahn, and disagree with everything stated by Hahn, as he evaluates the conflict through a different

perspective: that of a soldier. Conversation about the conflict is rife with hyperbole and judgment based comments, so it is easy to pick a side. Schaefer commented that his counterinsurgency training with the Special Operations Forces, which included instruction on how to foment insurgencies and construct bombs, enabled him to see both sides of the “COIN” when it comes to analyzing insurgencies and counterinsurgencies.

Every insurgency requires four components: (1) a vulnerable population, (2) a reason for the population to resist their government, (3) leadership, and (4) an ideology that can rally people behind the leadership. To really understand an insurgency, you must be able to understand the context in which insurgents are operating and the motivations behind their particular actions within this framework.

As Hahn stated, insurgent attacks are not conducted in retaliation to certain acts of Russian violence. The goal of an insurgency is to win support from the local population for the insurgent cause. Thus, insurgents have an incentive to articulate false motives for their acts of violence. Portraying the other side as the aggressor or “bad guy” is one of the most effective ways to increase the public desire for safety and thus bolster support for the insurgents. Indeed, the goal of an insurgent is to make the population more afraid of the “other” than of the insurgents themselves. As a result, it is not sufficient to look merely at what an insurgent says to understand his motives, but rather at why an insurgent is engaged in the activity. One must look at both what an insurgent says and what he does not say to understand his motives.

It is true that the CE leadership primarily constructs their statements in jihadist terms, but more notably the leadership never explicitly connects itself to Al-Qaeda. There is a reason for this. The insurgent leadership in the CE understands that the Islamic states were one of the few possible sources for outside support, but at the same time does not want to alienate the rank and file soldiers who are primarily fighting for nationalist causes. Furthermore, the leadership understands that the Islamist ideology is a great tool for motivating the vulnerable population to pick up guns and die for a cause. When vulnerable individuals are told God condones or supports the insurgent movement, it is easy for vulnerable individuals to become riled and motivated to fight. Yet, this is merely ideology as a tool. While some fighters and many the leaders may very well harbor genuine jihadist beliefs, these fighters would probably be content to stop their violence if they achieved independence, rather than continuing the global jihadist struggle.

When countering an insurgency, it is necessary to recognize all insurgencies consist of an amalgam of different groups and ideologies. Thus, any government undertaking a counterinsurgency campaign should try to split the insurgency by playing on divisions within it. In Schaefer’s view, Kadyrov has done a good job at this by playing up his Islamic heritage. He has failed, however, by relying too much on violence in a fashion that ultimately makes the population more afraid of his government than of the insurgents.

### **Concluding Remarks by Dr. Gordon Hahn**

Hahn responded to Schaefer's remarks, agreeing that the two approached the conflict with very different perspectives. First, Hahn challenged the idea that the CE leadership is not genuinely committed to a jihadist ideology. The fact that these leaders rely exclusively on Islamist appeals to recruit and motivate the population indicates that they want insurgents fighting for jihadist purposes, rather than for nationalist ones. If individuals join their movement for other reasons, this simply serves as an opportunity to indoctrinate them. If the leadership truly wanted people to fight for nationalist goals, they would at least mix nationalist appeals into their jihadist rhetoric. Second, the CE has not explicitly associated themselves with Al-Qaeda as a result of three factors: (1) a desire not to alienate those portions of society that may be fighting for nationalist reasons, (2) the independent nature of the mountain people, and (3) concerns about the strings that would become attached if the CE were to become an official Al-Qaeda affiliate. The current arrangement allows the CE to extract resources and support from Al-Qaeda and other Islamic organizations without committing the CE to other fronts of the global jihad.

### **Questions and Answers**

During the question and answer session, Lt. Col. Schaefer responded to a question about the current state of U.S.-Russian counter-insurgency cooperation, noting that he was not aware of any intelligence or strategy coordination between the two governments on the issue of counter-insurgency, even though both sides collaborated extensively on counter-terrorism. Much of the fault for this lies in the Russian government's unwillingness to label the resistance in the North Caucasus as an insurgency instead of terrorism.

In response to a question about whether or not insurgents conducted certain attacks in order to raise money, both Hahn and Schaefer highlighted that attacks are not conducted purely for fundraising, although fund-raising is a possible side benefit. Schaefer noted that media coverage of insurgent attacks is what makes them so productive, as the coverage demonstrates your organization's potential for success, making it easier to attract troops, money, and general support.

Hahn then commented on whether the targets chosen by insurgents were consistent with a jihadist ideology. First, insurgents frequently target Sufi Imams and mosques, which would be unproductive without an ideological motivation. Second, evidence that the CE is now participating in attacks outside of the Caucasus indicates they have larger, jihadist intentions. Finally, Hahn observed that the organization collects its funds on the basis of zakat, the Islamic tax.

Another issue addressed was the role of economic factors in motivating the insurgency. Chechnya, for instance, now has the lowest levels of violence of any of the North Caucasus

states, which could be a testament to Kadyrov's success in attracting funding from the central government. Schaefer agreed that economic factors are important, noting that any counterinsurgency operation is a task for the entire government, not just the military. The military can eliminate insurgent leadership and protect the population, but it is ultimately up to the government to provide legitimate rule of law and a stable social and economic situation. Hahn agreed, observing that Russia is far more effective at killing jamaats than it is at meeting the needs of the local populations.

Finally, the panelists addressed the overriding question: "what is to be done?" While neither panelist offered a particularly positive evaluation of the prospects for resolving the conflict, both were quick to point out the ways Russia must improve. First, further economic development is essential for long-run stability. Second, the government must act less brutally and indiscriminately in its use of violence, thereby more effectively protecting the local population and ensuring they will fear the insurgents more than the government. The Russian military must place higher priority on developing effective counterinsurgency tactics. The Russian government's refusal to see the violence in the North Caucasus as anything other than terrorism creates obstacles to managing the situation. The academic wing of the Russian General Staff must also stop using intellectual resources to rehash the lessons from the Great Patriotic War and begin focusing on modern counterinsurgency tactics. Hahn further noted that the CE operations and funding should be tracked on a global scale as it acquires a more global reach. Though the CE is far from an Al-Qaeda-style global threat, it nevertheless deserves our attention.