The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: Islam for Legitimation in the Aftermath of the Second Chechen War

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In the aftermath of the Second Chechen War, political actors resorted to the use of Islam as a legitimation tool. The Russian authorities in Moscow, the Chechen authorities in Grozny, and the Activist-Salafist movements all relied on the representations produced by religion to demand political power and legitimacy. All actors refer to their interpretation of Islam as ‘traditional,’ 'unique,’ or ‘correct,’ even when they differ significantly. This article aims to explore the relationships of interdependence between particular Chechen political actors and their use of Islam as a political tool. As a result, it finds that while there are unique traits to each actor’s use of Islam, this dynamic also follows a structure of co-dependence and varies depending on which two actors are involved. Interdependence is demonstrated through a graphic framework that illustrates the relation between Moscow and Grozny's use of Islam is based on an exchange of interests; the link between Grozny and Umarov’s activist Salafist movement is based on the quest for the ‘real’ Chechen Islam; and the relation between Moscow and the activist Salafist movement expresses itself on the continued resistance to the Russian government, amid the Global War on Terror.

Introduction

On August 7, 1999, two armies of Chechen, Dagestani, and international militants invaded the neighboring Republic of Dagestan in the Russian Caucasus. In early September 1999, these groups orchestrated a series of apartment bombings in Moscow and Volgodonsk, which recently designated Prime Minister of Russia Vladimir Putin immediately classified as Chechen terrorism. In response, the new Russian government immediately called for the execution of a bombing campaign against Chechnya, giving way to the Second Chechen War. The conflict eventually stabilized with the Russian capture of Grozny and the Kremlin appointment of Akhmad Kadyrov as president of the Putin-backed government of Chechnya in May 2000. However, for the next several years, armed insurgencies continued to operate through guerrilla warfare and terrorism. On April 16, 2009, Moscow declared the end of the counterterrorist operation in Chechnya, officially putting an end to the conflict.

The aftermath of the Second Chechen War involved constant political instability and violence, including the assassination of Akhmad Kadyrov in 2004, the periodic fragmentation of the Grozny-based government into opposing militias, and the Kremlin’s designation of Ramzan Kadyrov as Prime Minister of the Republic in 2006. Even after Kadyrov’s appointment in March 2006, his government faced backlash from other factions of the previous independentist movements in Grozny. Notably, former separatist leader Dokka Umarov founded the Caucasus Emirate, which comprised the political territory of the Chechen Republic, in October 2007 and declared himself emir of the new political entity in stark opposition to Kadyrov’s leadership. In 2015, the Caucasus Emirate pledged allegiance to the
Islamic State.

The end of the Second Chechen War was accompanied by an attempt by the Russian government to "normalize" or "Chechenise" the region. Moscow accepted the Kadyrov clan's assumption of power in Chechnya, establishing a dictatorial and nepotistic system in exchange for "feudal loyalty" to the central government. The government in the region reliably defends Moscow's positions in the international arena, while domestic politics has become almost exclusively Kadyrov's domain. During this "normalization" process, Kadyrov managed to build the image of the "good Chechen," loyal to Moscow and a pious Muslim. According to 2010 data, 95% of the population practices Shafii and Hanafi Islam, and many are also Sufis. Chechen Islam, with particularities derived from regional folklore and traditions, has been the fundamental pillar on which Kadyrov has built his legitimacy, in opposition to the "foreign" Islam of Salafism. Kadyrov also emphasized the concept of a "holy Russia," where Chechen Islam coexists with the other denominations accepted by Moscow.

In this context, a considerable part of the literature about the evolution of today’s Chechnya agrees on the relevance of Islam as a key political element. There is an academic consensus that motivations and discourse amid the First Chechen War were purely nationalistic, where Islam appeared only as one element of Chechen identity and not its essential trait. In contrast, during and after the Second Chechen War, different forms of Islam were claimed as determining components of the armed and political struggle in the territory by all actors. Consequently, Islam was used by the Chechen leadership in Grozny (and, by extension, to Putin’s authority in Moscow) to legitimize the need for the population to remain loyal to the government while other groups used Islam to encourage resistance.

This essay aims to explore how Islam has been used as a legitimation tool by various actors in Chechnya in the aftermath of the Second Chechen War. At this point, it is indispensable to note that this article will use Robertson’s definition of legitimation. According to that proposition, legitimacy is related to an institution’s entitlement to be obeyed. In that sense, the use of Islam as a tool to foster legitimacy is a process by which the different actors seek to increase their entitlement to obedience using that set of beliefs.

This paper identifies three main actors who sought political legitimacy through the instrumentalization of Islam. First is the Russian government (alternately referred to in this paper as ‘Moscow,’ ‘Putin,’ or ‘the Russian authorities’). This includes the Russian executive, as well as Russia’s Muslim supreme authorities, mainly those located in Moscow and Ufa. Second is the Chechen authorities (also labeled as the ‘Chechen government,’ ‘Grozny,’ or simply ‘Kadyrov’). These authorities, loyal to Moscow, differ from those of the defunct Chechen Republic of Ichkeriya (ChRI). Third is the Salafist-jihadist movement led by Umarov until he died in 2013. This Salafist (or simply jihadist) activist movement, also called Wahhabist by the Chechen authorities, rejected both traditional Sufi Russian and Chechen Islam to instead seek independence via the creation of an Islamic state in the North Caucasus.
This article’s central argument is that the three actors’ strategies for using Islam as a legitimation tool are co-dependent. Umarov's Salafist-jihadist discourse was constructed in opposition to both the Russian government's and the Chechen authorities’ instrumentalization of Islam. In the case of the last two, references to the former are constant even though they have practically quelled the threat. Moreover, in the Moscow-Grozny relationship, two paradoxical readings exist of what ‘good Islam’ represents, one pre-eminently Russian and the other from Grozny, which has come to be called ‘Kadyrovism.’

With regards to structure, this paper will be made up of three sections: (i) a brief description of the three actors’ defining traits of the use of Islam for legitimation; (ii) an analysis of the relations that appear between the three actors’ use of Islam; and (iii) concluding thoughts.

Every Actor’s Different ‘Islam’

Moscow’s Islam

Despite the prominence of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) as a political actor, Islam is quite present in Russia. According to a 2010 census, the country hosts around 15 million nominal Russian Muslims from all regions (and over two million additional migrants). Notable concentrations of Russian Muslims are in the North Caucasus (including Chechnya and Dagestan), the Moscow region, and Western Siberia. The majority of Russian Muslims are Sunni (90%), including some belonging to the Hanafi and Shafii sub denominations. The remaining 10% are part of other schools, like the Shia denomination, and, as will be seen further on, the Chechen Sufi variety of Islam.6

Within that context, the institutional landscape of Russian Islam deserves mention. Even though there is no clear recognition of a main authority in the general Muslim creed, the Russian community has accepted the leadership of centralized entities. Namely, the Central Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Russia was established in Ufa, and a parallel Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of the Russian Federation came to be in Moscow. These institutions are in constant competition to secure the backing of the Russian state as the main authority over the Russian Muslim population, as well as to acquire the loyalty of mosques and become the representatives of the community at large.7 Marlène Laruelle, an expert on illiberalism and Russian ideology, also mentions the existence of a Spiritual Administration for North Caucasian Muslims based in Makhachkala and the Moscow-located Russian Council of Muftis.8 Hence, the environment is quite diverse, and one of the characteristic traits is the existence of efforts toward institutionalizing the practice of these beliefs.

The differences and degree of competition between the religious authorities are extreme: it would be inaccurate to depict them all as part of one system.9 More specifically, the country's ecosystem is one where a central authority of religious rule is lacking but where the State does have a coordinating role in accepting what has a place (or not) in the political system.

Thus, the role of the Kremlin to guarantee utter control of Islam is part
of its strategy for legitimation, and the response of Muslim authorities has been to adopt a ‘compliant’ position where they have decided to avoid taking positions that could antagonize Moscow.\textsuperscript{10} Russian legislation reinforces this relationship by distinguishing between ‘traditional’ religions, which have equal rights, and ‘non-traditional’ religions, which are considered alien and even terrorist in some cases. This classification is the inheritance of a system that came to be in the late 1990s when former President of Russia Boris Yeltsin was pressured to divide the status of religious associations. This influence resulted in the drafting of a Federal Law On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations in 1997. While the law did not use the terms ‘traditional’ or ‘non-traditional,’ it did reference specific creeds as strongly related to the historical heritage of the peoples of Russia.\textsuperscript{11} Sibgatullina, a professor of illiberal regimes at the University of Amsterdam, proposed the same thesis contrasting religious groups in Russia using this ‘traditionalist paradigm.’\textsuperscript{12}

The division of creeds into traditional and non-traditional influenced different spheres of Russia’s politics. For one, the ROC uses said ideology explicitly, naming other religions as part of ‘independent ethno-confessional minorities.’\textsuperscript{13} Furthermore, the recognition of said minorities by the ROC is completely linked to their recognition that the Orthodox religion is a key and dominant element in the formation of Russian identity. This is the context in which Islam is regulated institutionally and which acquires importance to understand the use of religious belief as a tool of legitimation by the Russian state. Moreover, the adoption of provisions that limit the existence and activities of other religious groups is justified from a national security perspective. In the case of Islam, government control has been supported by various religious leaders as part of the struggle against terrorism and extremism. Even more so, statements by multiple muftis in the country agreed with the text of amendments that strengthened control by the State, justifying this decision on the need to fight the terrorism that appears in ‘pseudo-religious’ organizations.\textsuperscript{14} Hence, the institutional perspective helps make visible the legal dimension of the legitimation strategies, which will be further analyzed in the next section.

Conversely, a different dimension is that of the beliefs that are professed as part of mainstream Russian Islam. In that sense, the ‘traditional’ form of Russian Islam (independent of the institutions promoting it) is a specific creed. Some of the main elements of this ‘traditional’ variant include absolute allegiance to the Russian state, civic patriotism, adherence to Hanafism, and the valorization of Sufi traditions.\textsuperscript{15} These components were the product of the consensus of religious authorities of the country during Soviet times and differentiate this school from all other forms of ‘non-traditional’ Islam. Hence, this second possible dimension to constructing official narratives of Islam in Russia should be a new analysis point to explore possible legitimation strategies for every actor. In the following section, these dimensions of ‘traditional’ Islam (either accepted by the relevant institutions or fits within the ideological contours of the admitted schools) will be reviewed as potential mechanisms of legitimation of the
Russian state *vis-a-vis* the other actors.

**Grozny’s Islam**

Chechen Islam is one of the most distinctive forms of the religion, combining elements of Sufi thought and local traditions. Moreover, Sufi Islam is considered a source of unity for the people of the republic. The authorities in Grozny, particularly Ramzan Kadyrov, the head of the Chechen government, fostered a unique form of Islam to legitimize his rule.

This form of Islam has been understood as unique by scholars in the field, even if the Chechen leadership proclaims it to be the same ‘traditional’ creed as professed by the Russian state. Kadyrov’s version of Islam is a simplistic reinterpretation of the Sufi denomination coupled with other social norms. Thus, Kadyrov-accepted religious beliefs combine local folklore, nationalist practices, and Muslim customs. For instance, some of the most common rituals of the Republic include the public repetition of the name of God and the chapters of the *Quran*, as well as the promotion of pilgrimage to the tombs of local saints. It is worth noting that some of these practices would be considered idolatry (and thus, banned) under ‘traditional Russian’ Islam. This prohibition is accompanied by a very strict interpretation of religious beliefs, so puritanical norms are instituted as forms of social control. For instance, the authorities placed restrictions concerning the consumption of alcohol, gambling, and physical appearance. The control of the regime in this sense has gone so far as to declare the required lengths for beards for men to differentiate them from *jihadists*, demanding the use of the *hijab* for women (though not in the colors traditionally related to Wahhabism) and the prohibition of Western and ‘radical’ media. A 2015 study on the policies of the Chechen government revealed a clear intent of legitimation through Islam and imposed conditions on the social order of the Republic. More so, the authorities have carried out a policy for the construction of mosques in the country and the elimination of monuments that support the idea of an Islam that is distant from Russia. Specifically, monuments in memory of the victims of Soviet deportations (which remind the public of the existence of a Chechen plight in opposition to Moscow) are no longer accepted as they go against Kadyrov’s ‘unifying’ strategy. Thus, Kadyrov has been intent on creating and promoting his particular vision of Islam, which, in turn, produces a specific social order over the population.

Laruelle supports this view and emphasizes the importance of Islam as a central pillar that defines Kadyrov’s regime and creates a social order in tandem with the leader’s personal inclinations for control over the population. Kadyrov created a public image based on traditional ‘Sufi’ practices intermingled with Chechen culture and customs. Given the uniqueness of this set of beliefs within Muslim tradition, his government is also defined as the protector of the original Chechen form of Islam. Thus, Muslims who profess political ideas that go against Kadyrov’s (and Putin’s) are seen as radicals, infidels, and even terrorists. Moreover, the central idea is that only one form of Islam is traditional and Chechen.

**Activist-Salafists’ Islam**
In 2007, former President Dokka Umarov of the ChRI proclaimed a Caucasus Emirate in the region, with an apparent Salafist inclination. This ideology was in direct opposition to traditional Chechen Sufism. However, the support of some sectors of the population was not based on theological grounds but rather on dissatisfaction with the authorities in Grozny and the lack of a real alternative to Moscow's policies. Likewise, many of the movement's warlords had moved toward Salafist positions to obtain foreign funding, mainly from the Persian Gulf, for their war against Russia. Umarov's declaration of the Caucasus Emirate resulted in a series of dynamics that have been present in the region at least since the early 2000s, including poor socioeconomic conditions, an ethno-nationalist population, and the endurance of archaic tribal social institutions. These conditions facilitated the spread of a militant form of Salafism, which overshadowed the once-dominant Chechen separatism. A sense of regional solidarity or internationalism in opposition to Russians served as an ideological basis for this transition. As a means to unite the people, members of the Chechen resistance made use of Islam to overcome historically strong tariqa affinities, with the final aim of creating a non-ethnic Islamic theocracy. This way, militant Salafism is considered the only political counterweight to Moscow and an alternative plan to tackle society's problems. Finally, with the creation of the Emirate, Umarov confirmed the ideological shift of part of the Chechen rebellion, splitting it into Islamists and nationalists.

It was upon this Salafist-takfiri jihadist ideology that Dokka Umarov based the Caucasus Emirate, definitively abandoning the nationalist goals of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeriya and traditional Chechen Sufism. The foundational goal of this new emirate was “to liberate the Islamic Ummah (community) from jahiliyyah (barbarism) and rid the world of murtads and kuffar (infidels) in order to establish Sharia law on the whole earth.” This use of Quranic vocabulary and Arab-Muslim titles is an attempt at religious legitimacy by Umarov’s insurgents, for instance, by calling themselves mujahideen (warriors for the faith) and claiming the need to create dar al-Islam (land of peace).

Rather than purely doctrinal causes, the limited spread of this ideology can be attributed primarily to three factors: 1) the search for funding by various warlords in the inter-war period; 2) the conviction by a small part of the population that this was the only real opposition to Moscow's power; and 3) the exacerbation of the conflict produced by the excessive Russian military reaction. The rising popularity of Salafism at the expense of traditional Chechen Sufism led to the fragmentation and radicalization of the rebel movement. The principal contention between Chechen factions was the incompatibility of Salafi jihadism and traditional Chechen Sufism. As a result, the close alliance between Chechen warlords and well-funded jihadi groups secured relevant positions for both Salafists and foreign jihadists within the hierarchy of the separatist movement.

Lastly, the declaration of the Emirate essentially confirmed the collapse of the Ichkeriyan process. In fact, after Kadyrov’s victory and the post-war
schism within society, the plan for an independent Chechnya became less appealing.\(^{30}\) Furthermore, the failure of Salafist factions to create an Islamic State in Chechnya was a consequence of the rejection among the traditional Chechen Sufi population instead of the result of the Russian armed intervention.\(^{31}\) Because of the low support within Chechnya and the poor military and financial capacity, these Wahhabists sought support in surrounding areas with the declaration of the Caucasus Emirate.

The Co-Dependence of Strategies for Legitimation Through Islam

This section will analyze how each relation among the actors is bidirectional and how all are key components of each other’s use of Islam as a legitimation tool (Figure 1). Each axis represents one of the three main actors and their particular ‘Islams.’ The arrows refer to the bidirectional relationships under which we placed the ‘key’ element defining them. As such, the relationship between Moscow and Grozny’s use of Islam is based on an exchange of interests: Grozny offers ‘loyalty’ to Moscow in exchange for ‘laissez-faire’ in internal matters (concretely, the conduction of the particularities of Kadyrov’s Sufi Islam). The relation between Grozny and Umarov’s activist Salafist movement is based on the quest for the ‘real’ Chechen Islam: Grozny labels Salafist-wahhabists as ‘bad Chechen Muslims’ to build its conception of the ‘good Chechen Muslim,’ whereas the activist-Salafists portray Grozny as ‘kuffars’ that need to be eradicated while gaining access to foreign funding and fighters. Lastly, the relation between Moscow and the activist Salafist movement expresses itself through the continued resistance to the Russian government: Moscow depicts these rebels as terrorists and its effort to defeat them as part of the Global War on Terror (GWOT) to justify the securitization of Islam, while the activist Salafist rebellion gained popularity among part of the Chechen population mainly because it offered the only effective opposition to Russia’s power.

Figure 1. Interdependence of Islam as a Legitimation Tool

Moscow - Grozny: Laissez-faire in Exchange for Loyalty

Moscow, the Permissive Authority

The first relationship worth mentioning is between Moscow and Grozny. The Russian authorities have a laissez-faire approach towards the Chechen government and its use of religion as a legitimation tool. An initial factor to consider is the difference between the practice of Chechen and Russian Islam. As was mentioned in the previous section, there are very marked doctrinal differences between both currents. In particular, comparing both belief systems shows that the base ideology is quite different. On the one hand, Russian Islam (as professed by religious authorities) is a mixture of several ideological loyalties,
which contrast against the backdrop of Soviet political culture. The combination includes some Hanafi elements, the valorization of Sufi practices, and a high degree of State allegiance as a central component. This combination together assumes the role of a “traditional” Islam that is accepted by the State and marked by a clear emphasis on loyalty to the State. On the other hand, Chechen Islam is heavily influenced by local customs, can be described as a complex mixture of denominations, and has also taken a strongly puritanical dimension to it. Hence, there are two diametrically different forms of religion, and it might be hard to place the Chechen variety within the limits of what is ‘traditional’ from Moscow’s point of view.

Nonetheless, the promotion of this sort of “non-traditional” Islam is a consequence of the risks associated with religious transnationality or ‘global’ forms of Islam that could influence Russia. The existence of forms of Islam that span across different States is seen as a threat to national security, as it weakens the protagonism of the Kremlin and generates the possibility of identifying foreign actors. Hence, the strategy of the State is related to the support of local forms of Islam, which are in utter disconnection with each other but profess unwavering loyalty to Moscow. Moreover, the modus operandi of the authorities is one of co-optation of religion. The government has sought to centralize power and delegate authority only to selected institutions, which are supposed to keep control of beliefs and the political allegiance of Muslim communities. The benefit of the latter strategy is that the central government is not the actor dictating allegiance, which could endanger its standing with local communities or generate resentment. Even more so, “by allowing Islam to be addressed at the regional level, republican regimes are allowed to garner legitimacy through, for example, their association with regional identities.”

In the case of Chechnya, the Kremlin has chosen to maintain this same policy of delegation only to selected institutions despite the severe ideological differences between Russian and Chechen Islam. However, Chechen Islam has also enjoyed a more extensive set of liberties than the practices that occur in other republics. It is worth mentioning that the Kadyrov regime has promoted the adoption of a hardline interpretation of Islam, which imposes consequences on the lifestyle of the people in the territory. These policies include the tightening of control over the consumption of alcohol, the prohibition of gambling, and the establishment of “moralization” programs, which have had a considerable impact on the rights of women. Even more so, these restrictions not only align with the official Russian doctrine of Islam but have even been codified as law. For instance, Grozny has barred the entry of citizens of Danish origin and strongly voiced condemnation of Charlie Hebdo, even organizing a massive protest against the magazine. Sometimes, the contradiction is even more direct, such as when Kadyrov blatantly ignored the Russian State requirement for Grozny to investigate the occurrence of attacks against women. Further, Kadyrov has personally threatened important Russian political figures like Mikhail Khodorkovsky, declaring him “the enemy of all Muslims.” These policies and actions seek to reinforce Kadyrov’s strategy of presenting himself as one of the leaders of the Islamic world, not only in Russia.

Then, it is possible to see the contradiction here. The form of Islam that Grozny promotes is not only against Russian law in several of its aspects but is even in contradiction to the security perspective that the Kremlin has imposed upon said religion.
specifically. This was done by countering the ‘local’ focus of ‘traditional’ Russian Islam. The consequence of said inconsistency is that Moscow has assumed a laissez-faire position concerning Chechen religious leadership. Here, the central element is that Grozny’s Islam is viable only if it presents a strong allegiance to the Russian state. In return, Moscow disregarded the specific elements of the religion that did not fit with the ‘traditional’ view. Thus, the strategy in this case goes beyond the one that applies to the other republics, as it forces the Russian state to lose more control. However, the form of legitimation is clear: as long as allegiance is evident, institutional backing by religious authorities from Moscow is present towards Grozny.

Kadyrov, the Grand Loyalist

Kadyrov has been intent on continuing to enjoy the relative ‘liberty’ that Moscow grants through a strong demonstration of loyalty towards the Russian regime. Kadyrov has made a clear pledge of allegiance to the Kremlin, the most underscored aspect of Chechen Islam, to maintain its status as ‘traditional’ and therefore ‘accepted’ by Moscow. It is easy to see how Kadyrov has aimed to exhibit displays of patriotism and steadfast support for Moscow, as well as condemnation for every form of religious belief that is not in tandem with the Kremlin’s views.

One of the most interesting strategies used to reinforce allegiance to the Kremlin is the creation of discursive and dogmatic connections between Chechen Islam and elements of Russian identity. Kadyrov affirmed that Islam should embody the spirituality of the Russian motherland under the leadership of the ROC. Additionally, the Chechen authorities carried out a policy to eliminate monuments that support the idea of an Islam that is distant from Russia. Specifically, monuments in memory of the victims of Soviet deportations, which could serve as reminders of the existence of a Chechen plight in opposition to Moscow, are no longer accepted as they go against Kadyrov’s ‘unifying’ strategy. The most outstanding element is the idea of ‘Kadyrovism’ as a distinct political ideology that serves as a tool for both the Kremlin and the Chechen leader. The two most important components of ‘Kadyrovism’ are the appropriation of Chechen identity as directly included within Russian nationalism and, more importantly, the implementation of a hardline form of Islam related to the ‘traditional’ Chechen denomination. Likewise, another notorious practice is Kadyrov’s rehabilitation of previously rejected religious figures from Islam, but that had solid inclinations for Chechen unification with Russia. This happens in addition to Kadyrov’s self-promotion as the one who was able to ‘convert’ jihadists into loyalists and who is also a Muslim leader at the same level as others from the Gulf and the Middle East.

Moreover, references have been made to the idea of ‘Holy Russia’ as one entity that combines all Russians’ spiritual beliefs. This idea, therefore, centralizes the devotion of all believers in the country. This statement is significant if understood next to the notion of ‘Holy Russia’ as one that is linked directly to the existence of the motherland and brings forth its foundational myth. Moreover, according to Cherniavsky, the concept is thoroughly connected to Russian orthodoxy and expresses both the political culture predominant in the country and the importance of religion to identity. In this way, a notion that is a consequence of orthodox thought and Russian identity also enshrines Muslim belief. Hence, references to the concept by both Kadyrov and the head of the Central Muslim Spiritual
Directorate, Talgat Tadzhuddin, are demonstrations of devotion to the state itself as a defining element of the religious beliefs of spiritual leaders of the Republic. This is also underscored by the contact between Kadyrov and the Moscow Patriarchate, which is evidence of each other’s identification as legitimate political actors. Even more, it is remarkable that some of these approaches have been strongly criticized by other religious authorities in the country, but this has not had a significant impact.

On a related note, Kadyrov has also been keen on presenting himself as unwaveringly loyal to Putin. This is demonstrated by both a ceremony in which around 20,000 members of the Chechen special forces swore allegiance to Putin or the fact that Kadyrov presents himself as a ‘Putin-man’ or a ‘Kremlin man.’ This devotion is also related to the value of the motherland as part of Chechen Islam and continues to set an atmosphere in which attacks on Putin are attacks on the state and, therefore, on the religious dogma itself. The latter has gone so far as to suggest Kadyrov drop the title of President to be called imam of Chechnya to promote the unity of the republics, given that the only president can be the one in Moscow.

From this viewpoint, it becomes apparent that Chechen authorities are employing a strategy of legitimization by framing loyalty as a defining element of Islam. In other words, if Kadyrov defends the Russian state, that is only because by doing so, he is defending Chechen Islam. This position, in turn, allows the regime to enjoy Moscow’s favor and thus continue imposing the social order that is now dominant in Grozny.

**Moscow and Activist Salafism: Rebels or Terrorists?**

The legitimization relation logic that exists between Moscow and the activist Salafist movements in Chechnya has influences from both a narrative of securitization and the label of terrorism. In this sense, the use of labels is part of the strategy of the Kremlin to face ‘illegitimate,’ ‘non-traditional,’ or ‘radical’ forms of Islam (like Umarov’s movement). Russia pursued a policy of non-negotiation with Chechen separatists, branding all of them as ‘terrorists,’ which acquired international legitimacy after 9/11. This strategy of labeling Chechen resistance as ‘terrorists’ was unsuccessfully pursued by Yeltsin, as the international community supported the ‘underdog’ and most of the Russian population opposed the war.

Putin framed the Chechen conflict as a part of the GWOT to avoid criticism and opposition to Russian excesses in the war. Thus, Putin’s Chechenization plan and its absolutist strategy in Chechnya were accepted internationally, as Russia became an essential partner of the GWOT. This alleged ‘War on terror’ allowed Russia to pursue a ‘War of terror’ against radical (non-traditional) Islam, giving the concept of ‘counterterrorism’ an Orwellian meaning that justified brutally dealing with the Chechen insurrection. Moscow presented the attacks by the Chechen separatists as an international terrorist threat, to which all the members of the Chechen opposition belonged. In short, Putin successfully played the ‘Islamic terrorist’ card, with almost no opposition from the international community and increasing support within Russia, especially following different attacks such as the one in Nord-Ost in 2002 or the Beslan school siege of 2004.

Moreover, this discourse has been re-employed as part of the assignment of labels
to so-called terrorists (or radical Islamists). The logic of securitization has been present in the distinction between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ Islam. From the Kremlin’s point of view, forms of Islam that are ‘bad’ include those that are not loyal to the State and that seek to destabilize it. Additionally, allegiance to the state is a central element of ‘pious’ Muslim beliefs. Even more so, the dynamic of securitization has been carried out through legislative means so that all forms of what is radical are purged from Russian society. In particular, the fight against extremism has been intensified through different policy instruments, such as prosecutions and the prohibition of several organizations as part of restriction lists. Therefore, there is an ongoing fight to suppress ideologies deemed radical, which typically coincide with anti-government rhetoric. For that, Moscow’s approach to activist Salafist movements is one of labeling. In that sense, the existence of the tag is necessary as a way in which separatist views are purged and refused by Russian society in general. This way, if those who profess beliefs like Umarov are seen as terrorists, this justifies both the Kremlin’s targeting and the emphasis placed on accepted forms of Islam, which do not endanger the national security or territorial integrity of the Russian Federation as a whole.

Rebels

The rhetoric of national liberation that most activist Salafists employed was abandoned after the declaration of the Caucasus Emirate by Umarov in 2007. In its place, a non-ethnic Islamist project was put forward, aiming to attract fighters and resources from abroad. Nevertheless, the primary motivation for the armed struggle remained the fight against Moscow, which kept the first place in the jihadist’s hierarchy of hatred well above the Chechen authorities. Thus, Umarov’s promise to establish said trans-ethnic sharia state was conditioned upon the expulsion of the Russian occupier.

This discourse gained support thanks to the excessively violent Russian military intervention and the targeting of Salafists (including non-jihadists) by Moscow and Grozny due to the endurance of archaic and clan-based loyalties. This prosecution triggered an avalanche-like escalation of violence, as the clannish social organization and loyalties led the paternal relatives of the detained to seek vengeance for this ‘disgrace.’

At this point, many conceived Salafism as an alternative ideology providing relatively simple solutions for society’s complex problems. Additionally, Salafism’s growth had a political motivation rather than a theological one, as an increasing number of Chechens started to see jihadism as the only actual political counterweight to the Moscow-dominated state institutions.

Despite the radical Islamist elements of this rebellion, one of the main guiding principles remained the fight against Moscow. Even though the project of an independent Chechnya lost appeal, those who still saw Moscow as their main enemy joined the activist-Salafist movement as it became the most effective mechanism to keep opposing the Russian occupation.

Kadyrovism and Activist Salafism: The Question for the ‘Good Chechen’

‘Good’ vs ‘Bad’ Chechen Islam

The Chechen authorities have managed to construct a distinct political ideology that has come to be known as ‘Kadyrovism,’ which is used as a tool by both the Kremlin and the Chechen leader. This ideology
includes two key components: the appropriation of Chechen identity as directly included within Russian nationalism and, more importantly, the implementation of a hardline form of Islam in line with traditional Chechen practices. In this way, Grozny has established itself as an authority capable of administering the ‘moral and spiritual passport’ for deviant forms of Islam.

Since its arrival to power, Kadyrov has created a public image based on traditional Sufi Islam, which is inexorably linked to Chechen culture and customs. Kadyrov has managed to prevail over the ethno-nationalist discourse that, in opposition to Moscow, also used Islam as a tool for legitimization and mobilization. This redefinition of the Chechen Muslim ideology, linked to loyalty to Grozny and Moscow, is accompanied by the rejection of all those forms of Islam that reject the authority of these two actors, categorizing them as radicals, infidels, and even terrorists. This construction of the idea of the ‘good Chechen Muslim’ was particularly successful due to its antagonization of the Wahhabist/Salafist enemy, who embodied ‘bad Islam,’ foreign and far removed from its customs and traditions. As Kroupenev indicates, Kadyrov used the popular rejection of foreign forms of Islam, establishing himself as the defender of the true form of the Chechen faith. The infiltration of foreign Wahhabist/Salafist elements contributed to the fragmentation and radicalization of the Chechen separatist movement, legitimizing Kadyrov’s discourse and policies.

The resistance of the traditional Chechen population to the Salafist discourse was key to the failure of the project of the Islamic state of the Caucasus. However, despite the eventual defeat of the movement led by Umarov, references to it from Grozny are constant, reminding the population of the danger of deviating from traditional Chechen Islam, of which Kadyrov is the main defender. An illustrative example of this is the eighth-minute-long political advertisement broadcasted every day after the evening news, which promotes the Chechen regime’s legitimacy by referring to the foundational myth and Kadyrov’s traits as a pious Muslim leader who protects Chechen beliefs. This advertisement includes the official reference to the ‘negative past’ of the de facto independent Chechnya of the interwar period to later praise the ‘positive present.’ Furthermore, there is a strong message around the religious defining traits of Chechen identity and the differences that exist between the ‘traditional’ Sufi view of Islam and the radical Wahhabist foreign ideology that turned the region into one of the centers of international terrorism. Another illustrative example is provided by Vlaeminck, who explores visual media (through films and TV shows) in Russia and Chechnya to analyze the image built around Kadyrov and the perceptions he promotes. As an example, in one of the reviewed films, the author calls attention to the depiction of two different forms of Chechens: a Sufist ‘good’ image and a ‘Wahhabist’ character that is savage and evil. In that spectrum, Kadyrov is the leader who holds the legitimacy of the ‘good’ Chechen Muslim and who has a central role in the fight against the common enemy, which is ‘radical’ Islam.

In short, the construction of the ‘good Chechen Muslim’ promoted by Kadyrov was carried out largely in opposition to the ‘bad Muslim,’ radicalized by foreign tendencies that distanced themselves from tradition. The regime uses constant references to this dichotomy to legitimize the Kadyrov government and loyalty to Moscow.
Activist Salafism: Religious Conversion or Convenience?

The activist Salafism that spread in Chechnya from the inter-war period onwards was a break with traditional Chechen Sufi Islam. With the decline of the Caucasus emirate, the rebellion led by Dokka Umarov abandoned nationalism in favor of a project of non-ethnic Islamic theocracy. As is customary in jihadist movements, the discourse that supported this project was a dualistic Manichaeism, presenting their enemies (i.e., Moscow and Grozny) as infidels whom the mujahideen were supposed to eradicate.

However, the germ of this apparent religious conversion does not lie in theological motives but rather in the search for funding and support from rebel leaders. The Russian government's lack of support for Mashkadov's government facilitated the entry of radical Salafist elements into Chechnya, through which a significant number of warlords secured an influx of money and foreign fighters. The excessively violent Russian military intervention facilitated the fragmentation of the rebel movement and the radicalization of a larger number of fighters, who turned to these new Salafist positions.

However, the project did not obtain sufficient support in Chechnya due to the popular rejection of this new form of Islam, which was far from the Sufi tradition. That is why Umarov's declaration of the emirate can be interpreted as the confirmation not only of the failure of the project of the Republic of Ichkeria but also of the Salafi reformist wave. Umarov sought to attract young Muslim fighters, both from Chechnya and the surrounding republics, to this idea of a Sharia-ruled trans-ethnic state, taking advantage of the discontent some felt towards Moscow and the local Sufi authorities. As illustrated by Hankey, the Salafist resistance tried to diffuse the conflict over a wider area by framing it as a religious struggle, gaining financial resources and combatants from Islamists who were more willing to answer such a call to arms than to take arms to fight for Chechen independence.

In short, while it is true that Umarov and a considerable number of Chechen rebels adopted Salafi-jihadist positions, the main motivations and causes were the search for greater support to continue their armed struggle.

Conclusions

The use of Islam by the three mentioned actors follows a structure of interdependence. This interdependence is there even if there are different denominations that the Russian state, Kadyrov, or activist-Salafist movements in Chechnya promote as ‘traditional,’ unique, or accepted forms of Islam. More than that, what appears as an element of interest is that each narrative requires the others to have a certain power of legitimation over the actions of the actor. In the case of the Russian authorities, the supporting logic is one of recognition of certain forms of Islam, either through their institutionalization or their identification with specific beliefs. From this point, the relationships with each actor are framed within a security logic of combat against radicals and extremists (as with Umarov’s movement) or overall tolerance despite some friction (as demonstrated in the relationship between Moscow and Grozny). In this view, the legitimacy sought is related to the government’s policies, like the support of Kadyrov’s regime. Thus, the legitimacy of said continual approach depends on the existence of a group of Muslims classified as radical and threatening to national...
security (Umarov) and one that is ‘safe’ and fits within the accepted institutional and ideological contours of Russian Islam. Here, it is pertinent to say that the actual degree of theological closeness between Kadyrov’s Islam and that of the Russian state is a matter of further research and exceeds the scope of this article.

As a counterpart, the Chechen authorities’ use of religion is much more connected to their own legitimacy as recognized political actors in the Republic. For Kadyrov, the use of Islam again is a tool that does not seem to follow a very clear ideological project but is built from a unique understanding of Muslim beliefs in conjunction with local traditions and nationalist practices. The power behind said combination is that Kadyrov’s placement as a defender of his own brand of Islam makes him the legitimate leader of the Chechen people. However, the power of this narrative is only present if the other actors are part of the discourse. Regarding Moscow, Kadyrov’s argument of representing the ‘traditional’ and accepted creed is only valid if tolerated by the state’s religious authorities and the Kremlin. Moreover, the Chechen leader’s argument depends on Putin not cataloging it as one of those organizations that pose a risk to the security of the Russian Federation in general. For that, Kadyrov must show loyalty to Moscow and make his Islam brand one that identifies with Putin’s regime. On the other hand, presenting himself as ‘the good Chechen Muslim’ is only possible in opposition to ‘the Bad Chechen Muslim,’ a role that is accomplished by Umarov’s movement. In this regard, more investigation into the current content of Chechen Islam and the specific relationship between Grozny and the national Muslim authorities could be necessary.

Finally, the activist Salafists’ position in the structure of legitimation is mediated by the importance of its vocation of resistance. Therefore, it is crucial to understand that the movement was created to better represent the unconformity of a part of the population with both the Chechen and the Russian state and calling for the republic’s independence. Hence, the position that they seek to legitimate is their role as main combatants against the other actors. For that, the role that the movement sought to play required the other actors in the narrative to portray itself as the real resistance. In the case of Moscow, this relation is a consequence of the discourse that Umarov was the only viable opposition to the Kremlin, as Kadyrov had already betrayed the group. Furthermore, the use of Islam in its most radical forms also helps Umarov distinguish himself (and his movement) from traditional Chechen Islam and depicts him as closer to Wahhabist movements from other regions of the planet. The creation of this image turned out to be highly profitable for the movement in both economic and logistical terms. In this dimension, valuable questions for further research can focus on the later pledge of allegiance of the movement to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria and how that decision plays into our proposed model. Additionally, it should be noted that Umarov’s assassination in 2014 left space for further fragmentation of the movement. This is despite constant references in the discourse of the actors supporting his specific movement. Thus, additional research is needed to analyze the political culture within this form of opposition.
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1 While this is the official version, there are different perspectives to this story, mainly that the Russian government was behind the apartment bombings.


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