

By Scott Stewart and Ben West

On April 9, a woman armed with a pistol and with explosives strapped to her body approached a group of police officers in the northern Caucasus village of Ekazhevo, in the southern Russian republic of Ingushetia. The police officers were preparing to launch an operation to kill or capture militants in the area. The woman shot and wounded one of the officers, at which point other officers drew their weapons and shot the woman. As she fell to the ground, the suicide vest she was wearing detonated. The woman was killed and the man she wounded, the head of the of the Russian Interior Ministry's local office, was rushed to the hospital where he died from his wounds.

Such incidents are regular occurrences in Russia's southernmost republics of Chechnya, Ingushetia, Dagestan, Kabardino-Balkaria and North Ossetia. These five republics are home to fundamentalist separatist insurgencies that carry out regular attacks against security forces and government officials through the use of suicide bombers, vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs), armed assaults and targeted assassinations. However, we have noted a change in the operational tempo of militants in the region. So far in 2010, militants have carried out 23 attacks in the Caucasus, killing at least 34 people — a notable increase over the eight attacks that killed 17 people in the region during the same period last year. These militants have also returned to attacking the far enemy in Moscow and not just the near enemy in the Caucasus.

History of Activity

Over the past year, in addition to the weekly attacks we expect to see in the region (such as the one described above), a group calling itself the Caucasus Emirate has claimed five significant attacks against larger targets and, notably, ventured outside of the northern Caucasus region. The first of these attacks was a suicide VBIED bombing that seriously wounded Ingushetia's president, Yunus-bek Yevkurov, and killed several members of his protective detail in June 2009 as Yekurov was traveling along a predictable route in a motorcade from his residence to his office. Then in August of that year, CE militants claimed responsibility for an explosion at the Siberian Sayano-Shushenskaya hydroelectric dam that flooded the engine room, disabled turbines, wrecked equipment and killed 74 people (the structure of the dam was not affected). In November 2009, the group claimed responsibility for assassinating an Orthodox priest in Moscow and for detonating a bomb that targeted a high-speed train called the Nevsky Express that runs between Moscow and St. Petersburg and killing 30 people. Its most recent attack outside of the Caucasus occurred on March 29, 2010, when two female suicide bombers detonated IEDs in Moscow's underground rail system during morning rush hour, killing 40 people.

The group's claim of responsibility for the hydroelectric dam was, by all accounts, a phony one. At the time, STRATFOR was not convinced at all that the high level of damage we saw in

images of the site could be brought about by a very large IED, much less a single anti-tank mine, which is what the Caucasus Emirate claimed it used in the attack. STRATFOR sources in Russia later confirmed that the explosion was caused by age, neglect and failing systems and not a militant attack, confirming our original assessment. While the Caucasus Emirate had emerged on our radar as early as summer 2009, we were dubious of its capabilities given this apparent false claim. However, while the claim of responsibility for the dam attack was bogus, STRATFOR sources in Russia tell us that the group was indeed responsible for the other attacks described above.

So, although we were initially sceptical about the Caucasus Emirate, the fact that the group has claimed several attacks that our Russian sources tell us it indeed carried out indicates that it is time to seriously examine the group and its leadership.

Russian security forces, with the assistance of pro-Moscow regional leaders such as Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov and Ingush President Yunus-bek Yevkurov, are constantly putting pressure on militant networks in the region. Raids on militant hideouts occur weekly, and after major attacks (such as the assassination attempt against Yevkurov or the Moscow metro bombings), security forces typically respond with fierce raids on militant positions that result in the arrests or deaths of militant leaders, among others. Chechen militant leaders such as Shamil Basayev (who claimed responsibility for the attack that killed pro-Russian Chechen President Akhmad Kadyrov and the Beslan school siege, both in 2004) was killed by Russian forces in 2006. Before Basayev, Ibn Al-Khattab (who was widely suspected of being responsible for the 1999 apartment bombings in Russia) was killed by the Russian Federal Security Service in a 2002. The deaths of Basayev, Khattab and many others like them have fractured the militant movement in the Caucasus, but may also have prompted its remnants to join up under the Caucasus Emirate umbrella.

It is impressive that in the face of heavy Russian pressure, the Caucasus Emirate not only has continued operations but also has increased its operational tempo, all the while capitalizing on the attacks with public announcements claiming responsibility and criticizing the Russian counterterrorism response. Between March 29 and April 9, the group coordinated three different attacks involving five suicide operatives (three of which were female) in Moscow, Dagestan and Ingushetia. This is a substantial feat indicating that the Caucasus Emirate can manage several different teams of attackers and influence when they strike their targets.

Doku Umarov: A Charismatic (and Resilient) Leader

The Caucasus Emirate was created and is led by Doku Umarov, a seasoned veteran of both the first and second Chechen wars in which he was in charge of his own battalion. By 2006, Umarov had become the self-proclaimed president of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, an unrecognized secessionist government of Chechnya. He has been declared dead at least six times by fellow militants as well as Chechen and Russian authorities, most recently in June 2009. Yet he continues to appear in videos claiming attacks against Russian targets, including a video dated March 29, 2010, in which he claimed responsibility for the Moscow metro attacks.

In October 2007, Umarov expanded his following by declaring the formation of the Caucasus

Emirate as the successor to the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria and appointing himself emir, or leader. In his statement marking the formation of the Caucasus Emirate, Umarov rejected the laws and borders of the Russian state and called for the Caucasus region to recognize the new emirate as the rightful power and adopt Shariah. The new emirate expanded far beyond his original mandate of Chechnya into Dagestan, Ingushetia, North Ossetia and other predominantly Muslim areas farther to the north. He called for the creation of an Islamic power that would not acknowledge the current boundaries of nation-states. Umarov also clearly indicated that the formation of this emirate could not be done peacefully. He called for the "Islamic" entity to be created by forcefully driving out Russian troops. The policy of physically removing one political entity in order to establish an Islamic emirate makes the Caucasus Emirate a jihadist group.

Later, in April 2009, Umarov released another statement in which he justified attacks against Russian civilians (civilians in the Caucasus were largely deemed off-limits by virtually all organized militant groups) and called for more attacks in Russian territory outside of the Caucasus. We saw this policy start to take shape with the November 2009 assassination of Daniil Sysoev, the Orthodox priest murdered at his home in Moscow for allegedly "defaming Islam," and continue with the train bombing later that month and the Moscow metro bombing in March 2010.

Umarov has made it clear that he is the leader of the Caucasus Emirate and, given the effectiveness of its attacks on Russian soil outside of the Caucasus, Russian authorities are rightfully concerned about the group. Clearly, however, there is more there than just Umarov.

A Confederacy of Militant Groups

The Caucasus Emirate appears to be an umbrella group for many regional militant groups spawned during the second Chechen war (1999-2009). Myriad groups formed under militant commanders, waged attacks (sometimes coordinated with others, sometimes not) against Russian troops and saw their leaders die and get replaced time and again. Some groups disappeared altogether, some opted for political reconciliation and gave up their militant tactics and some produced leaders like the Kadyrovs who formed the current Chechen government. All in all, the larger and more organized Islamist groups seen in the first and second Chechen wars are now broken and weak, their remnants possibly consolidated within Umarov's Caucasus Emirate.

For example, the militant group Riyadus Salihin, founded by Basayev, seems to have been folded into the Caucasus Emirate. Umarov himself issued a statement confirming the union in April 2009. When Basayev was killed in 2006, he was serving as vice president of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria under Umarov. Significantly, Riyadus Salihin brought Basayev together with Pavel Kosolapov, an ethnic Russian soldier who switched sides during the second Chechen war and converted to Islam. Kosolapov is suspected of being an expert bombmaker and is thought to have made the explosive device used in the November 2009 Moscow-St. Petersburg train attack (which was similar to an August 2007 attack in the same location that used the same amount and type of explosive material) as well as devices employed in the March 2010 Moscow metro attack.

The advantage of having an operative such as Kosolapov working for the Caucasus Emirate cannot be understated. Not only does he apparently have excellent bombmaking tradecraft, but he also served in the Russian military, which means he has deep insight into how the forces working against the Caucasus Emirate operate. The fact that Kosolapov is an ethnic Russian also means that the Caucasus Emirate has an operator who is able to more aptly navigate centres such as Moscow or St. Petersburg, unlike some of his Caucasian colleagues. While Kosolapov is being sought by virtually every law enforcement agency in Russia, altering his appearance may help him evade the dragnet.

In addition to inheriting Kosolapov and Riyadus Salihin, the Caucasus Emirate also appears to have acquired the Dagestani militant group, Shariat Jamaat, one of the oldest Islamist militant groups fighting in Dagestan. In 2007, a spokesman for the group told a Radio Free Europe interviewer that its fighters had pledged allegiance to Doku Umarov and the Caucasus Emirate. Violent attacks have continued apace, with the last attack in Dagestan conducted as recently as March 31, a complex operation that used a follow-on suicide attacker to ensure the death of authorities responding to an initial blast. In all, nine police officers were killed in the attack, including a senior police commander, which occurred just two days after the Moscow metro attacks. The March 31 attack was only the second instance of a suicide VBIED being used in Dagestan, the first occurring in January 2010. This tactic of using a secondary IED to attack first responders is fairly common in many parts of the world, but it is not normally seen in Dagestan. The timing of the attack so close to the Moscow metro bombing and the emergence of VBIEDs in Dagestan opens the possibility that the proliferation of this tactic may be linked to the expansion of the Caucasus Emirate.

In the Crosshairs

The Caucasus Emirate appears to have managed to centralize (or at least take credit for) the efforts of previously disparate militant groups throughout the Caucasus. Russia announced that it would start withdrawing troops from Chechnya in April 2009, but some 20,000 Russian troops remain in the region, and the start of withdrawal has likely led to a resurgence in local militant activity. Ultimately, Moscow will have to live with the threat, but it will work hard to ensure that militant groups stay as fragmented and weak as possible. While the Caucasus Emirate seems to demonstrate a relatively high level of organization, as well as an ability to strike at Russia's heartland, STRATFOR sources say Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin was outraged by the Moscow attacks. This suggests that people will be held accountable for the lapse in security in Moscow and that retribution will be sought in the Caucasus.

Umarov's founding statement for the Caucasus Emirate, in which he called for the region to recognize the emirate as the rightful regional power and adopt Shariah, marked a shift from the motives of many previous militant leaders and groups, which were more nationalistic than jihadist. This trend of regional militants becoming more jihadist in their outlook increases the likelihood that they will forge substantial links with transnational jihadists such as al Qaeda — indeed, our Russian sources report that there are connections between the group and high-profile jihadists like Ilyas Kashmiri.

However, this alignment with transnational jihadists comes with a price. It could serve to

distance the Caucasus Emirate from the general population, which practices a more moderate form of Islam (Sufi). This could help Moscow isolate and neutralize members of the Caucasus Emirate. Indeed, key individuals in the group such as Umarov and Kosolapov are operating in a very hostile environment and can name many of their predecessors who met their ends fighting the Russians. Both of these men have survived so far, but having prodded Moscow so provocatively, they are likely living on borrowed time.

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