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The Radicalization of Chechnya

A case study of the spread of radical Islam in Chechnya

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Abstract

Wahhabismen och andra radikala former av Islam var okända i Tjetjenien före 1990-talet. Men under de två konflikterna mellan Ryssland och Tjetjenien 1994 till 1996 och 1999 till i dag så har Wahhabismen alltmer spridit sig bland Tjetjenierna. Trots att Wahhabismen inte är så utbredd i Tjetjenien som de flesta tror är Wahhabi-inspirerad terrorism nu ett allt vanligare inslag i den Rysk-Tjetjenska konflikten. Den här uppsatsen undersöker anledningarna till spridningen av radikala Islam i Tjetjenien. Syftet är att presentera en omfattande bild av alla anledningarna till spridningen av Wahhabi Islam i Tjetjenien. Den här uppsatsen är formulerade som en teorikritisk fallstudie som analyserar Samuel Huntingtons teori om kampen mellan civilisationerna och Anatol Lievens teori om sambandet mellan religion och nationalism. Undersökningen visar att ingen av teorierna ensam kan förklara spridningen av Wahhabi Islam i Tjetjenien, som endast kan förklaras av ett antal olika anledningar. Den här uppsatsen har funnit sex anledningar till spridningen av Wahhabismen i Tjetjenien, nämligen frånvaron av en central Islamisk stat, konfliktens längd och brutalitet, utländska inflytande, påtvingade konverteringar, den demografiska explosionen i Tjetjenien under 1980-talet, och förlusten av många anförvanter i det långa kriget.

Nyckelord: Tjetjenien, Huntington, Islam, Wahhabismen, terrorismen
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1 Introduction

Chechnya has had a long and troubled relationship with Russia, which resulted in two wars following the collapse of the Soviet Union and Chechnya's declaration of independence. Instead of reestablishing Russia's power, the two wars have furthered destabilization in Chechnya. The region remains torn by conflict despite the cessation of full-scale Russian military offensives. The nature of the conflict has become muddled, however, as certain separatist factions have been trying to turn the nationalist conflict into an Islamic war. Radical Islam began showing its influence in Chechnya during the first war and has since become an important factor in the conflict, resulting in several unconventional attacks on Russian targets and the fragmentation of the separatist movement.

The terrorist tactics and radical beliefs of a number of Chechens are unprecedented in Chechnya but contrary to popular belief, radical Islam is embraced only by a minority of the population. Many believe radical Islam to be more widespread than it actually is due to the high level of participation and publicity of this minority in the conflict. While Chechnya waged Islamic war against Russia during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Islam under which they rallied was markedly different from the modern-day Wahhabism which is pervading Chechnya. Due to their long period under Soviet rule, Chechens remain rather ignorant of the outside Muslim world and the invasion of an outside Islamic movement is therefore unusual. Additionally, Chechens practice a form of Sunni Islam with Sufi influences, and Sufis and Wahhabis have never had harmonious relations.

One of the most peculiar aspects of the Wahhabi terrorism being carried out in the name of Chechnya is the involvement of women who, for the most part, do not enter into battle in Chechnya. These women are not only participating in the conflict but are frequently used as suicide bombers, a tactic previously alien to Chechnya. These drastic changes are made even more noticeable by the fact that they have occurred over a relatively small time span.

These anomalies led me to formulate my research question, which is: *what are the causes behind the spread of radical Islam in Chechnya?*

1.1 Aim

The aim of this thesis is to provide a comprehensive explanation of the causes of the spread of radical Islam in Chechnya. Most of the research on the subject fails to provide an in-depth explanation for this recent phenomenon and presents only a partial picture of the causes. This thesis will, through the application of two theories, investigate different claims and eventually arrive at its own conclusions concerning the causes behind the spread of radical Islam in Chechnya.

1.2 Method

The method I use to approach the research problem is theoretically critical. I will use two theories, Samuel Huntington's clash of civilizations theory, focusing primarily on his arguments about Islam, and Anatol Lieven's religion and nationalism theory. I will investigate the research question by examining Huntington's argument that Islam has bloody borders, with the assumption that his argument is insufficient in answering the research question. His argument will then be contrasted with the alternative explanation on the relationship between religion and nationalism presented by Lieven.

2 Theory

2.1 Huntington: the Clash of Civilizations

Huntington is a realist who bases his theory on the belief that the world is multipolar and multicivilizational for the first time in history. The collapse of the Soviet Union spelled the end of the bipolar era, resulting in the emergence of multiple powers and civilizations. This is not to say that civilizations did not exist before the Cold War, but that improved communications and mobility increased contact between different civilizations. World politics are now shaped by civilizations, which Huntington defines as the highest cultural grouping and broadest level of cultural identity (Huntington 1996, p.43). This grouping incorporates the intellectual characteristics of a society with its way of life and encompasses common beliefs and values, one of the most important of which is religion. However, civilizations do not have clear-cut boundaries and are distinguished from race and political entities. Civilizational identity has become our strongest identity and is now the driving force behind conflict in the world, replacing superpower rivalry. Conflicts occur not only between civilizations but also within civilizations in the form of tribal or ethnic conflicts.

Huntington divides the world into seven different civilizations: Sinic, Japanese, Hindu, Islamic, Western, Latin American, and possibly an African civilization. One of the most controversial claims Huntington makes is that Islam has what he terms as “bloody borders” (ibid., p.254). He claims that at the micro level of world politics, the primary clashes between civilizations occur between Muslims and non-Muslims because Muslims have difficulties coexisting peacefully with their neighbors. Huntington cites certain data which shows that Muslims were engaged in significantly more intergroup violence in the early 1990s than non-Muslims, leading to the conclusion that Muslim societies are more prone to violent conflict. The militarization of Muslim society can also be said to be evidence of the Muslim tendency toward violence: military force ratios and military effort indices were much higher than those of other nations (ibid., p.258). When Muslim states have been involved in international crises, they have resorted to violence more often than other nations. The violence used is often of high intensity, meaning outright war or major clashes. The bottom line is that Muslims are naturally more bellicose than others.

Huntington lists several causes of the Muslim propensity toward violence, one of which is history. Prior violent conflict between two civilizational groups generates lasting fears and insecurities for both groups and the situation can easily become violent once more. He goes on to cite six possible causes of the Muslim propensity toward violence,

three of which explain violence which occurs between Muslims and non-Muslims and three of which explain the latter and intra-Islam violence. The six causes are as follows:

1. *Islam is a religion of violence.* Islam, a religion which originated among warring tribes, has from its very birth been a violent religion. It promotes violence and glorifies military virtues because its doctrines encourage war against nonbelievers. The Koran and other authoritative works on Islam do not contain many prohibitions on the use of violence, and the notion of nonviolence is not present in either Muslim doctrine or practice. This is evidenced by the fact that Muslims began fighting amongst themselves once early expansion of Islam had diminished.
2. *Since its conception, the spread of Islam has brought Muslims into contact with several different peoples who were subsequently conquered and converted, the legacy of which remains.* Muslims and non-Muslims live close to each other throughout Eurasia due to Muslim and non-Muslim land expansion, which leads to conflict. Westerners do not live in close proximity to non-Western lands, however.
3. *The indigestibility of Muslims, or in other words, the problems Muslim countries have with non-Muslim minorities and vice versa.* Islam combines religion with politics, which makes it difficult for non-Muslims to adapt to living with Muslim majorities and for Muslims to adapt to living with non-Muslim majorities.
4. *Western treatment of Muslim societies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries created an image of Muslim military and economic weakness which encourages non-Muslims to view Muslims as attractive targets.* According to this, Muslims are the victims, but Huntington says this cause does not explain the conflicts in Sudan, Egypt, Iran, or Indonesia.
5. *The absence of core states in Islam.* Islam is instable because it has no center: when a state desires to be a leader of Islam, it competes with other Muslim states for influence.
6. *Muslim societies have experienced a demographic explosion and have a large number of young, usually unemployed males available, which is a natural source of instability and violence within Muslims and against non-Muslims.* This is, according to Huntington, the most important cause.

As this thesis focuses not on the causes of the Chechen conflict but the causes of the spread of radical Islam in Chechnya, I will only be addressing three of the above reasons. The remaining causes are only relevant if researching the causes of Chechnya's conflict with Russia. Islam's purportedly violent nature and lack of core state will be examined along with the demographic explosion in Muslim societies to see if they can explain the spread of radical Islam in Chechnya.

2.2 Lieven: Religion and Nationalism

According to Huntington, civilizations are the driving force behind conflicts. Since religion is one of the defining characteristics of a civilization, it also holds that religious identity is one of the driving forces behind conflict. However, Lieven's theory claims the opposite, namely that *conflict is the driving force behind religiosity*. Conflict is not fuelled by fanatical religious feelings but vice-versa. In other words, strong religious identity does not develop until after a conflict has begun. Lieven believes there is a process underlying the development of fervent religiosity and nationalism, which goes thusly: over a span of centuries, a group will develop an ethnocultural and religious identity. This ethnos may come under threat from a national group with different religious beliefs, whereby the ethnos will strengthen its religious convictions and embrace more fanatical forms which may help to strengthen both its military and cultural resistance power. New forms of religion and religious institutions may develop. For a period it will appear, and may even be true, that the struggle is chiefly religious in nature and does not stem from ethnicity or nationalism. Eventually, however, the new religious identity and religious resistance becomes supplanted by a secular nationalism with noticeable religious influences (Lieven 1998, pp.355-356).

The commitment of the new nationalists to their religion depends on two things:

1. The conservatism of their society and class
2. The degree to which their national culture appears threatened either by assimilation or destruction by outside cultural influences

Some nationalists may adhere to religion if the process of homogenizing modernization in their societies has been cruel, miserable, and bears close association with outside imperial power and culture even if the threat of assimilation or destruction of their culture is not huge. Additionally, strong religious feelings can be explained if a nation and its members have been involved in many wars and expect to be involved in more because "we all pray when under fire" (ibid., p.356).

3 Historical Background

3.1 Sheikh Mansur and Imam Shamil's Legacy

The numerous conflicts between Russia and Chechnya can be seen in essence as one conflict spanning over more than two hundred years. Russia decided to expand into the Caucasus in the eighteenth century, prompting Sheikh Mansur's Islamic uprising in which the Chechens participated. Another Islamic uprising occurred in the middle of the nineteenth century during the Caucasian Wars under the leadership of Imam Shamil. Both Mansur and Shamil used the Koran to unify the Caucasian people and strengthen their opposition to Russian expansion. They waged *ghazawat* (holy war) and turned the conflict into "us against them" or rather, Muslims against oppressive Christians. Islam was one of Chechnya's primary sources of inspiration during its clashes with Russia between 1829 and 1921 (Lieven 1998, p.357). Chechens still regard Mansur and Shamil, both of whom were essentially two of the world's earliest Islamic fundamentalists, as national heroes.

While jihad has been declared by some against Russia during the first and second Chechen wars, the jihad waged in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was markedly different from the "jihad" being waged today (if it can be termed such). The jihads of Sheikh Mansur and Imam Shamil's time were just wars waged in response to Russian aggression. Russia was a Christian nation bent on expansion into the Caucasus, and the largely Muslim Chechens and Dagestanis declared a jihad in response. The Caucasian people would not allow themselves to be ruled by a nation which promoted Christianity and denigrated Islam.

3.2 1990 – present: Wars and Terrorism

3.2.1 First Chechen War, 1994 – 1996

In light of Chechnya's strong resistance to Russian rule, it should have come as no surprise when a coup occurred in 1991, resulting in Chechen nationalist Dzhokhar Dudayev seizing power of Chechnya. Yeltsin tried to stop this, but his forces suffered a humiliating defeat when they were turned back to Moscow after landing in Grozny airport. Moscow turned its attention back to Chechnya in 1994, when it launched a full-

scale invasion. The war lasted until 1996, when the Russians conceded defeat and withdrew from Chechnya.

3.2.2 Interbellum 1996 – 1999 and Second Chechen War, 1999 – present

An interbellum period of three years followed, during which the resistance movement became fragmented between secular nationalists and Wahhabis. While this was a period of de facto independence for Chechnya, terrorist attacks and clashes still occurred intermittently. It was one terrorist incident in Dagestan, orchestrated by Arab and Chechen militants, which led to the Second Chechen War in 1999. While there is no longer a full-scale military offensive, the conflict continues to this day.

3.2.3 Rise in Terrorism: Notable Incidents

Islamic terrorism in Chechnya began near the end of the first war but became more commonplace during the second war. Below is a short description of some of the most notable terrorist incidents¹.

The first notable terrorist incident occurred on 14 June 1995 in the Russian town of Budyonnovsk. Rebel leader Shamil Basayev, the commander of Chechen Wahhabis, led a group of fighters in a siege, eventually taking over 1,000 people hostage in the town hospital (Gall and De Waal 1997, pp.256-259). The incident prompted a ceasefire and caused Russia to pay greater attention to peace talks (Lieven 1998, p.125 and Seely 2001, pp.276-279).

Several months later, in October 1995, a number of car-bombs targeting Russian officials exploded in the Chechen capital of Grozny. It is believed Moscow was involved in the bombings (Gall and De Waal 1997, p.285). This was only the start of Moscow's alleged involvement in Chechen terrorist attacks.

Warlord Salman Raduyev led a siege on the Chechen city of Gudermes in December 1995. Three weeks later, he led an attack in neighboring Dagestan, in the town of Kizlyar. A small number of Arab mujahideen fighters and Chechen female fighters were involved in the incident, which was a copy of the Budyonnovsk raid.

A larger attack in Dagestan was led by Basayev and Saudi Wahhabi Ibn-ul-Khattab in August 1999 in an attempt to create an Islamic state in the north Caucasus (Seely 2001, p.306). Later that month, a series of bombs exploded in Russia, mainly in apartment blocks and shopping centers. These blasts led to Russia's decision to invade Chechnya again. While it is unclear who was responsible for the bombs, many believe there was Russian involvement (*ibid.*, p.308).

¹ Note: the word "terrorism," while not always linked to Islam, is used in conjunction with radical Islam in this thesis because the majority, if not all, of Chechen terrorist attacks are orchestrated by Wahhabis.

It was around this time, in 2000, that Chechen suicide bombings first occurred. Due to the conflict in Chechnya, Russia boasts the highest number of female suicide bombers in the world. (Juzik 2005, p.9) Several female suicide bombers were involved in one of the most infamous Chechen terrorist incidents, the Moscow theatre hostage crisis of 2002 in which a number of Chechen fighters took approximately 850 hostages when they seized a Moscow theatre during a production of *Nord-Ost*. Around 170 people died when Russian forces stormed the theatre after releasing a gas which rendered everyone inside the theatre unconscious.

The most infamous Chechen terrorist incident occurred in the Ossetian town of Beslan in September 2004, when Chechen terrorists held more than 1200 children and adults hostage in a school. The crisis lasted for three days. On the third day, gunfire was exchanged between the Chechens and Russian forces. The incident resulted in the death of 344 civilians, 186 of whom were children. It is believed that only one terrorist survived.

4 Islam's Bloody Borders

Huntington's claims on the violent nature of Islam are precarious. If true, they would provide an explanation for the cause of the spread of radical Islam in Chechnya. According to Huntington's theory, Muslims are prone to violence because the concept of nonviolence is virtually absent from the Koran and other Muslim text. There are few, if any, restraints on the use of violence in Islam and war against nonbelievers is advocated. Therefore, the rise of Islamic terrorism in Chechnya is a logical result of Islam's violent nature. As a result, it should come as no surprise that a number of Chechens have started embracing radical Islam and are using it as a religion of the sword because Islam *is* a religion of the sword. Can it be said that the spread of radical Islam in Chechnya is due to the Muslim propensity toward violence? The validity of this claim will be addressed below.

4.1 The Concept of Jihad

Huntington's belief that Islam is a violent religion represents a widespread misinterpretation of Islam. Huntington's argument in this area focuses on the nature of Islam and the words of the Koran, not on the history of its implementation. It is therefore necessary to examine Islam and the Koran to prove that Islam is not a violent religion and to reveal how violence is addressed in the Koran in order to label his argument as a misinterpretation. Contrary to Huntington's assertion that Islam has from the start been a violent religion, Islam began as and remains a religion of peace. David Cook states this in his book *Understanding Jihad*: "Islam did not begin with violence. Rather, it began as the peaceful proclamation of the absolute unity of God by the Prophet Mohammed [...]" (Cook 2005, p.5). Islam began with peace; however, violence was soon needed to protect it. Islam's complex relationship with warfare can be summed up in MJ Akbar's description: "Islam, as the word itself implies, does not seek violence. Equally, Islam does not permit meek surrender either" (Akbar 2002, p.2). The latter sentence reveals a huge difference between Christianity and Islam: whereas the suffering of Christ is a central part of Christianity, the strength of Mohammed is a central part of Islam. Mohammed was not expected to suffer for his beliefs like Christ. This defiance to persecution is easily misunderstood in a world where Islamic societies are becoming overwhelmed by Western influences.

The idea of not permitting meek surrender rests upon the concept of jihad, a central concept of Islam which is also a point of contention among non-Muslims and

Muslims alike. Although many believe the word “jihad” means holy war, it is actually derived from the Arabic word “jahd”, which means to exert or strive (ibid.). Jihad is divided into two types: the *Jihad al Akbar*, or greater jihad, and the *Jihad al Asghar*, or lesser jihad. The greater jihad implies a spiritual struggle within oneself, while the lesser jihad is associated with warfare and is misunderstood by many, including Islamic extremists. The lesser jihad advocates violence against nonbelievers, but it does so only under specific circumstances. Under these circumstances, war is required of Muslims and those who do not fight are condemned by the Koran. The important part to emphasize here is that war is a must only in certain cases, namely if Muslims are under persecution from a group of nonbelievers. According to Islamic doctrine, Muslims are allowed to fight and will be aided by Allah if war is being made against them (ibid., p.8). Mohammed followed this rule when engaged in jihad, fighting only when other groups were threatening him and his followers. The famed battle of Badr is an example of this: the battle of Badr was fought in self-defense because the Quraysh, a Meccan tribe, had plans to assassinate Mohammed (ibid., pp.7-8).

Contrary to Huntington’s assertion that Islamic doctrine does not contain many prohibitions on violence (Huntington 1996, p.263), Islamic doctrine defines clear limits to the circumstances under which jihad may be carried out and to the nature of violence used in battle. These limits are illustrated in verses 190 to 194 of the Sura of Al Baqarah:

Fight in the cause of Allah those who fight you, but do not transgress limits; for Allah loveth not transgressors. And slay them wherever ye catch them, and turn them out from where they have turned you out; for tumult and oppression are worse than slaughter; but fight them not at the Sacred Mosque, unless they (first) fight you there; but if they fight you, slay them. Such is the reward of those who suppress faith. And fight them on until there is no more Tumult or oppression, and there prevail justice and faith in Allah; but if they cease, Let there be no hostility except to those who practise oppression. But if they cease, Allah is Oft-forgiving, Most Merciful. The prohibited month for the prohibited month, - and so for all things prohibited, - there is the law of equality. If then any one transgresses the prohibition against you, transgress ye likewise against him. But fear Allah, and know that Allah is with those who restrain themselves².

The above verses delineate when and how jihad should be carried out: jihad should be carried out relentlessly against an enemy who is oppressing you until they are either dead or have stopped oppressing you. When they cease their fighting and oppression, you must cease your fighting as well. Additionally, the passage places restraints upon the nature of the fighting involved in a jihad when it tells warriors to restrain themselves and not transgress the limits of violence. According to Islamic scholar Abdullah Yusuf Ali, a transgression of limits would include attacking women, children, the elderly or the sick (Akbar 2002, p.21). Thusly, the words of the Koran do not condone unrestrained, indiscriminate attacks, or, in other words, terrorism.

² Ali, Abdullah Yusuf. “The Cow”, *The Meanings of the Holy Qu’ran* verses 190-194. <http://www.islam101.com/quran/yusufAli/QURAN/2.htm>

4.2 Wahhabism³

Wahhabi Islam is usually regarded as a direct and aggressive response to globalization, associated as it is with Osama bin Laden and other terrorist movements. While extremists do use Wahhabism as a radical ideology which espouses global jihad, Wahhabism itself does not espouse radicalism. One would think that Huntington's supposition that Islam is violent would certainly apply to Wahhabism, but a closer examination of Wahhabism reveals that, like Islam as a whole, the perceptions of it as a violent ideology are without basis. The more radical and violent forms of Islam one hears of today are not inherent to Islam itself but are the result of modern reinterpretations. In order to understand the true nature of Wahhabism, one must understand the background of its founder and its foundation.

Wahhabism was founded by Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab during the eighteenth century, which was a time of Islamic reform and revival. Ibn Abd al-Wahhab pays close attention to jihad in his writings, with his interpretation differing slightly from that of the Koran. He believed that Islam was not best spread through jihad but through missionary work, placing great emphasis upon the roles of knowledge and learning in the spread of Islam. Ibn Abd al-Wahhab defined jihad as a "collective duty, required of those who fulfill the requirements established by God: submission to Islam, maturity, financial ability, free (as opposed to slave) status, the intent to remember and serve God in this endeavor, and good moral character" (DeLong – Bas 2004, p.201). In addition, jihad can only be declared by an imam and must be both defensive and have a religious justification. The goal of jihad as emphasized by Ibn Abd al-Wahhab is not to kill, but to fight in order to repel or conquer the enemy.

As well as specifying the aim of jihad, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab also delineates the circumstances under which jihad is both required and not required. There are three instances in which all adult male Muslims must engage in jihad, which are as follows:

1. When two divergent groups confront each other
2. When the enemy leaves his territory and tries to conquer those in geographical proximity
3. When an imam calls for jihad (however, an imam has the responsibility only to call for a jihad under the right circumstances and not to deliberately incite violence.)

Similarly, he notes two cases in which jihad should not be carried out, one of which directly contrasts the actions and beliefs of many modern-day Wahhabis, who believe that jihad should be carried out against those whose practices offend Islam. Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, however, believed that jihad should not be carried out just because a group of people have personal habits or practices which Muslims may think of as offensive or inappropriate. "[...] jihad is not appropriate when conducted as an offensive or preemptive action or to strike down a group whose personal habits or practices may not be in keeping with one's own interpretation of Islam" (ibid., p.203). While such people

³ Information in the following section is taken from Natana J. DeLong-Bas's book *Wahhabi Islam* (2004).

may offend a Muslim's moral senses, they are not involved in any acts of aggression and jihad must therefore not be declared against them. Furthermore, one cannot declare jihad against someone with whom one has a treaty or is engaged with in business because one has a relationship of protection with them.

The Wahhabi interpretation of jihad thus calls for limits to when and how it is carried out. Firstly, an attempt must be made to convert the opponents to Islam. If the opponents refuse to convert, jihad can then be carried out. However, only adult male Muslims are obliged to engage in jihad, and consequentially only adult males may be targeted in battle. Unless a woman takes an active role in fighting against Islam, intentionally killing innocent women and children is prohibited. Moreover, a Muslim engaged in jihad should only kill an opponent if he or she speaks against Islam during battle and actively resists it. Interestingly enough, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's views diverge from the hadith (collections of the sayings and deeds of Mohammed) because he believes that a Muslim engaged in jihad is allowed to retreat if outnumbered. He also believes that a Muslim is allowed to surrender if he believes he will be taken prisoner. Martyrdom and violence are thusly less well-esteemed in Wahhabism than in the hadith which implies that Wahhabism is, to an extent, a somewhat conservative form of Islam. The true nature of Wahhabism therefore stands in direct contrast to the way it is being used in places such as Chechnya today⁴.

4.3 Intra-Islam Violence

Defining jihad in the context of the Koran and Wahhabism reveals that jihad dictates defensive war against aggressive nonbelievers, not war against all nonbelievers as is the popular assumption. Although the history and misinterpretations of the concept of jihad help explain conflict between Muslims and non-Muslims, it does not help explain *fitna*, or conflict within Islam. The word *fitna* encompasses both violent conflict and disagreement or divergence within Islam. Fitna is certainly occurring in Chechnya between those adhering to traditional Chechen Islam and those adhering to Wahhabism. In order to examine the causes behind the spread of Wahhabism in Chechnya, one needs to examine the reasons behind intra-Islam conflict because the two are inherently linked. Can the reasons Huntington gives for conflict within Islam be applied as causes of the spread of Wahhabism in Chechnya?

Huntington gives three reasons for the frequent Muslim involvement in inter- and intracivilizational fighting, one of which has already been disproved. Subsequently, the two remaining causes are the absence of a core state in Islam and the demographic explosion of young Muslim males. The former will be addressed first. Due to the wide array of interpretations and implementation within Islam, it would appear true that Islam does lack a core state. Even Muslims belonging to the same sect frequently disagree with

⁴ Despite Wahhabism being a peaceful movement by origin, the term will be used to refer to the radical ideology it has become in the remainder of this paper.

one another over how to interpret the hadith. Islam has no center of power which can regulate or direct Islamic matters. There is another important factor which contributes to this, which is *ijtihad*, the concept of encouraging individual interpretation of the Koran and other Islamic scriptures. *Ijtihad* became revived in the eighteenth century following a rejection of *taqlid*, or imitation of the past interpretations. As a result of the rejection of *taqlid*, new, fresh interpretations of Islam, such as Wahhabism, arose in the eighteenth century. The twentieth century also witnessed the rise of new interpretations of Islam, most notably those of Hassan al-Banna, Mawlana Mawdudi, and Sayyid Qutb. The three aforementioned scholars had highly influential and radical ideas on Islam and jihad which diverged greatly from any previous interpretations. Their ideas, which arose as the result of the encouragement of *ijtihad* in Islamic reforms and revivals, divided the Islamic world. Although the encouragement of independent thought and interpretation is undoubtedly positive, it inevitably leads to disagreement and conflict. Moreover, the lack of a core state or central authoritative figure in Islam means that nobody is in any position to resolve these conflicts.

What does this have to do with the spread of Wahhabism in Chechnya? This is relevant to the spread of Wahhabism in Chechnya because Islam's lack of a core state has allowed movements such as Wahhabism to proliferate. There is no authoritative figure or body which can mediate divergence within Islam. This is further complicated by the instability and corruption in Chechnya, which allow the spread of radical Islam to go unchecked. This is perhaps the "big picture" cause of the spread of radical Islam in Chechnya as it puts the problem into the context of the wider Islamic world. In a sense, this is also a rather indirect cause because it looks at the current nature of the Islamic world and not at the circumstances surrounding the Chechen conflict. However, the broad nature of the cause does not mean it is rendered any less important. If Islam had a core state, it is doubtful as to whether the Wahhabi movement would be active and subsequently doubtful as to whether Wahhabism would be spreading in Chechnya. This alone is not sufficient in explaining the spread of Wahhabism in Chechnya, however. It is necessary to look at other potential causes to see whether or not they hold true.

The third cause, which Huntington claims to be the most important in explaining both inter- and intracivilizational conflicts, focuses on more immediate social instead of religious causes, namely that of the recent demographic explosion in Muslim societies. This explosion means that these societies suddenly have large numbers of usually unemployed young males who are susceptible to influence and would probably accept any kind of work which would give them income, a sense of belonging, or both. Chechnya experienced a rise in birth rate in the 1980s, supplying the region with a large number of young males (Huntington 1996, p.260). Young unemployed males are frequently a source of instability in any society, but they are a particular threat in vulnerable war-torn societies. While the demographic explosion is an important factor in understanding the causes behind the spread of radical Islam in Chechnya, Huntington does not mention the important psychological and financial matters involved. Huntington focuses on the premise that the larger a group of people, the more their voices will be heard. He places great weight on the fact that unemployed males are a source of

instability in Muslim societies yet does not explain why they would be attracted to violence, which is important in the case of Chechnya.

Many young Chechen males are attracted to Wahhabism because it offers them refuge and a sense of belonging (Seely 2001, p.305). These youths have nothing to lose as they are usually poor and have limited prospects. The chance to kill Russians is most likely an added incentive. According to academic Edward Walker, Wahhabism is largely embraced by young men in Chechnya. “To the extent that Wahhabism actually is finding a significant base of social support in the North Caucasus, it is likely to be among militant youths who have no employment opportunities, were members of militia units to which they remain loyal and that provided – and continue to provide – them with security and a sense of belonging to a community” (ibid.). These militant youths have grown up with violence and continue to inflict violence on others later in their lives. War has alienated and desensitized them to the point where they have little to hold onto and are thus susceptible to manipulation. This is perhaps the most important aspect of the demographic explosion – the fact that these young men have been negatively affected by war. Huntington mentions in passing that other factors may be at work, but he places the most emphasis on the demographic explosion alone.

4.4 Summary

Huntington’s theory does not provide an ample picture of the causes of the spread of radical Islam in Chechnya. His first claim, that Islam is a violent religion, was proven to be untrue while his second claim, that Islam lacks a core state, provides an answer to the research question but it is a very far-reaching answer. It is necessary to look at the more immediate causes as well, which Huntington’s third claim does. Chechnya’s demographic explosion in the 1980s means there is now a large number of young males in Chechnya who, like many other Chechens, have been devastated by the war. These impoverished youths have few opportunities and turn to Wahhabism not because they necessarily believe in it but because they welcome the opportunity to join a community of sorts and obtain a possible monetary award for their efforts (this aspect will be explored in depth in section 5.2.1). Huntington’s theory is therefore not wholly incorrect but it does not provide all the answers to the research question. Several questions, such as how Wahhabism came to Chechnya in the first place, remain unanswered, making it necessary to examine other possible causes.

5 Embracing Radical Islam: Why?

5.1 Lieven and the Development of Religiosity

As opposed to Huntington's argument, Lieven maintains that conflict is the driving force behind religiosity instead of vice-versa. This religiosity which develops is partly the result of despair and partly tactical. According to this, the spread of radical Islam in Chechnya is a direct result of the conflict with Russia and cannot be explained by looking at the nature of Islam itself. Lieven applies this theory to the Caucasian Wars, which he claims were primarily religious in nature, contrasting this with the first and second Chechen wars, whose origins were nationalistic. Lieven disproves the view that most of the international community has of the Chechen conflict, which they believe to be motivated by religious sentiments. Natana J. DeLong-Bas voices this mistaken assumption in her book on Wahhabism, explaining that the conflict in Chechnya stems from perceived religious injustice:

Global jihad continued to provide ideological and religious inspiration, but each society had its own specific issues that had to be addressed. The common points were the goals of overthrowing existing infidel governments via armed jihad and creating Islamic states to take their places. It was this global vision, not the missionary activities of Saudi Wahhabis, that resulted in the civil wars and armed insurrections ranging from Algeria to Uzbekistan to Chechnya. These wars have at their roots the common perception of unjust, un-Islamic governments repressing religion in the public sphere. This, combined with the dire socioeconomic conditions and repressive and authoritarian governments in these societies, is at the root of the rise of radicalism in these countries (DeLong-Bas 2004, p.268).

The Chechen conflict did not erupt because Russia was suppressing Islam, but because Russia was repressing Chechnya itself. Revived nationalism led to the outbreak of war, not revived religiosity. Although it is true that socioeconomic conditions and the harsh policies of Moscow have contributed to the rise of radicalism in Chechnya, the conflict did not arise because of Russian suppression of religion.

The seeming religiosity of the conflict can be attributed to the fact that the Chechens were led by Islamic fundamentalists in their previous conflicts with Russia and that Islam remains an important part of Chechen culture even for the nonreligious. "[...] I would say on the contrary that the Chechen struggle of the 1990s has been overwhelmingly a national or nationalist one. In so far as it has taken on a religious colouring, this was mainly because Islam is seen, even by irreligious Chechens, as an integral part of the national tradition and of the nation's past struggles against Russian domination" (Lieven 1998, p.357). Lieven does not address Wahhabism in his book, but his theory can still be applied to the current Chechen conflict. While Lieven maintains that the development of religiosity which his theory describes occurred during the Caucasian Wars and that the seeming religiosity that is apparent in Chechnya today is the

legacy of this development, it appears that Chechnya is undergoing this cycle again, albeit on a much smaller scale. To elaborate, it is true that the conflict in Chechnya is motivated by nationalist and not religious sentiment, but it is also true that Wahhabism is spreading through the region. While the development of religiosity that occurred during the Caucasian Wars was widespread and unified Caucasian resistance, the spread of Wahhabism is limited and fracturing the Chechen resistance movement. We are witnessing a small fraction of the ethnos embracing more radical forms of religion which strengthen their resistance. Chechnya was invaded by a Christian nation, resulting in a brutal war. Emotions such as hopelessness and the quite realistic prospect of losing the war encouraged some Chechens to seek out drastic and desperate forms of warfare which would turn the war in their favor. Thus, in order to strengthen their military resistance power, these Chechens turned to Wahhabism. At the same time, however, the religious legacy of the Caucasian Wars remains, meaning the separatist movement and Chechnya itself is split between the more moderate individuals who combine Sunni beliefs with Sufism and the radical Wahhabis.

However, Lieven's theory does not provide a sufficient explanation of the spread of Wahhabism in Chechnya on its own. While effective in explaining the spread of religiosity which occurred during the Caucasian Wars, the spread of Wahhabism is much more complex because Wahhabism goes against Chechen beliefs. Traditionally, Chechnya does not have such a high standing in the Islamic world, with its denizens sometimes being labeled as bad Muslims (Gall and de Waal 1997, p.33). Thus, the invasion of a radical and strict ideology into a society known for its unorthodox form of Islam seems rather inexplicable. How did this alien belief and its alien practices come to Chechnya?

5.2 Outside Influence

Obviously, it is no coincidence that Wahhabism came to Chechnya at a time when it is spreading around the world. In a sense, the Chechen conflict would appear to be a lesser battle in the grander aim of a global jihad. But Chechens usually do not concern themselves with outside Islamic matters, preferring to focus more on their own concerns. How, then, did Wahhabism spread to Chechnya? The answer to this question lies in the influx of foreign fighters and funding into Chechnya during the 1990s. A number of Arab and Bosnian mujahideen fighters came to Chechnya when they saw pictures and heard reports of Chechens with Islamic slogans on their clothing fighting against the oppressive Russians, including now deceased Wahhabi leader Ibn ul-Khattab (Seely 2001 p.306). The mujahideen do not seem to sympathize with the Chechens' cause, however, but rather are more interested in furthering their vision of a global jihad (ibid.). A number of these fighters fought against Russia in Afghanistan and Tajikistan. When left with few other battles, they turned their attention to what they perceived as an Islamic conflict in

Chechnya. The Chechen conflict was a further opportunity to advertise their cause to the international community.

Whatever the Wahhabis' reasons for going to Chechnya, their presence has had a profound impact on the conflict. Had they not decided to enter the conflict, it is doubtful as to whether or not radical Islam would have come to Chechnya at all. Foreign funding and support has also furthered the spread of radical Islam in Chechnya⁵. While no government has actually supplied military aid to Chechnya, some have helped to train fighters. Iran offered now deceased Chechen president Dzhokhar Dudayev assistance during the first war, but he refused. The Saudi Arabian Islamic Relief Organization, which has supposed links to terrorism, supplied money to fighters in Chechnya. Additionally, Pakistan is also a known supporter of the Chechen cause. The false perception of the Chechen conflict as a religious war has led some members of the international community to offer assistance to what they see as their Muslim kin. While outside influence is highly important in explaining the spread of Wahhabism in Chechnya, it is equally as important to examine why Chechens themselves are embracing this previously alien ideology.

5.2.1 Female Suicide Bombers⁶

Outside influence can be understood in two ways: first, as religious influences from the larger Islamic world outside of Chechnya and second, as influence from other people in Chechnya. In other words, influence can come from without Chechnya and without oneself. This statement is made because Wahhabism is primarily spread through people who can be termed as "missionaries." To put it simply, there are Chechen Wahhabis who go around finding people whom they can convert to Wahhabism. Some of these missionaries force individuals to convert to Wahhabism while others take advantage of vulnerable individuals who have suffered personal loss. Wahhabism is thusly being spread rather actively in Chechnya. The extent of the Wahhabis' active conversion is revealed through an examination of the world of female suicide bombers.

For many females who choose to become suicide bombers, personal loss is a strong motivational factor. Someone who has had to endure hardship and loss can find a haven within Wahhabism. For instance, Ajza Gazujeva, a Chechen girl who exploded herself outside of Commandant Gejdar Gadzjijev's headquarters in the city of Urus-Martan in November 2001, turned to Wahhabism after both her husband and brother were killed by Russian soldiers. The brutal murder of her husband Alichan was a decisive factor in her becoming a Wahhabi. Alichan was one of the many Chechen males detained by Russian soldiers on suspicion of being a Wahhabi. When Commandant Gadzjijev, who had detained Alichan, found out that he was not a Wahhabi, he did not release him

⁵ The following information is taken from Carlotta Gall and Thomas de Waal's book *Chechnya: a Small Victorious War* (1997, p.308).

⁶ Information in the following section is taken from Julia Juzik's *Allahs svarta äinkor* (2005).

but beat him up instead. Subsequently, Ajza was summoned to witness Gadzjijev slitting open Alichan's stomach. Her head was then shoved into his stomach, covering her in her husband's blood as she watched him die. Her brother was killed in a similarly heartless fashion soon afterward. Despite the fact that he had already lost one leg after stepping on a mine, Russian soldiers were not deterred from shooting him for fun while he was walking through the Urus-Martan on crutches. The additional loss of her brother may have been the decisive factor in Ajza's decision to become a suicide bomber. She had already been visited by a man who had been giving her Wahhabi literature shortly after Alichan's death. This man then took Ajza to somewhere where there were other Chechens who had suffered at the hands of the Russians. She subsequently killed herself, Gadzjijev, and two Russian soldiers. Following this incident, the man who had persuaded her to become a suicide bomber was given 200,000 US dollars from rebel leader Shamil Basayev.

Twenty-five year old Sekimat Alijeva turned to Wahhabism as the result of personal loss as well. Sekimat was one of the female suicide bombers present at the infamous siege of the Dubrovka theatre in Moscow in 2002, which occurred during a production of Nord-Ost. She turned to Wahhabism after her brother, who was also a Wahhabi, was killed in the second war. During a stay in Azerbaijan where she was cared for by Wahhabis, she was persuaded to become a suicide bomber. According to the cousin of Rajman Kurbanova (a suicide bomber who also participated in the Dubrovka theatre siege), all Chechen women have a reason to turn to Wahhabism. "You ask if she was motivated by revenge. Do you know, in Chechnya every woman has her own personal motive. Every family has had someone die during the war. This war is only a never-ending funeral. People are killed right in front of other people's eyes or taken away without negotiations or processes."⁷ The brutal reality of the Chechen conflict has affected all of Chechnya and virtually all women can be said to have their own motive for exploding themselves in retaliation against the Russians.

Yet the story seems to be more complicated than this. This is not just a story of loss and despair, but of money, corruption, and forceful tactics. Many of these suicide bombing attacks are orchestrated by Wahhabi leaders in order to attract international attention to the Chechen conflict. They are not spur of the moment attacks or fuelled by strong emotional conviction alone, but strategic, planned, and well thought through. The attack on the Dubrovka theatre, for instance, was planned well in advance. The shahidkas (Russian feminine version of *shahid*, the Arabic word for martyr) present at the attack were carefully recruited and coerced into being participating. They were not, as advertised by the Wahhabis heading the operation, a group of "Black Widows" at all. Although the Wahhabis declared that these women were motivated to become shahidkas because their husbands had been killed at the hands of the Russians, many had become married to Wahhabis prior to the siege. In addition, the parents of a number of the girls

⁷ Author's translation. Original text as follows: "Ni frågar om hon hade ett hämndmotiv. Vet ni, i Tjetjenien har varje kvinna sitt eget personliga motiv. I varenda familj är det någon som har dött under kriget. Det här kriget är en enda begravning utan ände. Människor mördas inför ögonen på andra eller förs bort utan förhandlingar och processer." Juzik 2005, p.44

knew that their daughters were being sent on a dangerous mission and were rewarded with cash for their complicity and relocated to Baku, Azerbaijan.

While some of the shahidkas at the Moscow theatre siege were motivated by the loss of their husbands and knowingly committed themselves to a dangerous operation, other shahidkas were forced into it. They were married, either with or without the consent of their parents, off to Wahhabis who subsequently forced them to take part in Nord-Ost. Warlords and female suicide bombings are inherently linked in Chechnya – Shamil Basayev was the leader of a brigade of suicide bombers called Riyadus Salihin, which was involved in the Nord-Ost drama. Basayev was the mastermind behind the attack, which involved an entire network of men and women active in the recruiting of females. Similarly, notorious warlord Arbi Barayev convinced many females to become suicide bombers, including family members. His seventeen year old cousin drove a truck full of explosives into a Russian military outpost in Alkhan-Kala in June 2000, while his widow was a shahidka in the Dubrovka theatre siege.

Investigating the motivations of female suicide bombers and those who recruit them reveals several things about the spread of Wahhabism in Chechnya. It appears that many Chechens turn to Wahhabism for personal reasons, not because they are necessarily attracted to the ideology out of sympathy with its beliefs. Wahhabism offers them a haven and a possible explanation for why they have to endure such suffering. For some, it also offers a way to get revenge. Those who have suffered personal loss, while they may initially be willing to embrace Wahhabism, do not convert to Wahhabism on their own but are frequently persuaded by Wahhabi missionaries. Thusly, the spread of Wahhabism is carefully regulated; it is not a natural outcome of the brutal and desperate nature of the war.

6 Conclusion

The aim of this thesis is to provide a comprehensive explanation of the causes behind the spread of radical Islam in Chechnya. During the course of my research, I found that there are several factors at work behind the spread of radical Islam. These causes must be looked at in conjunction with one another, because individually are not adequate in explaining the spread of radical Islam in Chechnya. In the first section of analysis, Huntington's argument about Islam's violent nature was examined and found to be untrue. His argument concerning Islam's lack of a core state was then examined and found to be true, but even though this is a cause of the spread of radical Islam in Chechnya, it is a rather broad cause and it was necessary to examine the more immediate causes. The demographic explosion in Chechnya was then found to be an additional cause of the spread of radical Islam, but Huntington's theory left a number of questions unanswered. Lieven's theory was then examined and found to be true but it too could not provide a full answer to the research question. It was then necessary to look at the personal motivations of those who embrace and spread Wahhabism.

The causes behind the spread of radical Islam in Chechnya were found to be (the following list does not list the causes in any particular order of importance):

1. Islam's lack of a core state, which has allowed movements such as Wahhabism to proliferate. Additionally, the lack of an Islamic core state means that no state is able to mediate conflicts within Islam, allowing the destabilizing spread of Wahhabism to continue in Chechnya.
2. The nature of the conflict itself, namely that it has been particularly brutal and lengthy. This has caused Chechens, who wish for the conflict to end in their favor, to turn to Wahhabism because it offers them a tactical advantage and strengthens their position in relation to the Russians. To use a saying, desperate times call for desperate measures.
3. Outside influence in the form of imported fighters and imported funding. Foreign fighters brought the ideology of Wahhabism to Chechnya.
4. Forced conversion of Chechens by Wahhabis who are seeking to further their cause, be it Chechen independence or global jihad.
5. The demographic explosion of the 1980s, which resulted in a large number of young, frequently unemployed Chechen males. Due to the destruction of Chechnya's infrastructure, these youths are usually impoverished and lack opportunities for advancement. Growing up during a brutal conflict has desensitized them toward violence, and many have them have served in militia units. Wahhabism attracts them

because it can give them a sense of belonging to a group and possible financial rewards.

6. Personal loss, which could perhaps be incorporated into cause number 2. An individual is particularly vulnerable to radical ideologies if he or she has suffered great personal loss, especially if these ideologies offer a method of revenge against the perpetrators of this loss.

The results of the research laid out in this paper present a complex picture of how and why Wahhabism is being spread in Chechnya. While both Huntington's and Lieven's theories were helpful in answering the research question, neither theory can answer the question on its own. This case study reveals both a comprehensive picture of the causes of the spread of radical Islam in Chechnya and the shortcomings of theory when applied in specific cases, something which Huntington himself admits of his own theory.

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