

RUSSIA, IRAN, AND THE CONFLICT IN CHECHNYA

Martin Malek*

Abstract

The reactions in the Islamic world to Russia's wars in Chechnya from 1994 to present were by far not as strong as the 'Islamic solidarity' claim might have suggested. Theocratic Iran was no exception. Sceptical remarks from some Iranian officials were immediately softened by reservations: Chechnya is an "internal affair" of Russia whose territorial integrity Iran would certainly continue to respect. At the beginning of the second war in Chechnya in 1999, Iran was chairing the Organisation of the Islamic Conference and made ostensible efforts to keep its role as a means of criticising Moscow as small as possible. Russian President Vladimir Putin showed himself not to be very familiar with matters concerning international or only Russian Islam. On many occasions he made patronizing comments about Islam, without triggering a sharp reaction from Iran or other Islamic states and organisations.

Keywords: *Iran, Russia, Chechnya, Islam, separatism, Organisation of the Islamic Conference, terrorism*

Iran and Chechnya

Chechen separatism as of 1991 was not motivated by Islam (or even Islamism) but developed on a "purely secular basis of socio-cultural and political protest."¹ In fact, Islam was not mentioned in Chechnya's separatist constitution of 1992. Instead, article 43 (paragraph 1) reads: "Freedom of conscience is guaranteed. The citizens of Chechen Republic have the right to profess any religion or profess no one, to execute religious ceremonies and to conduct any other religious activity not contradicting the law."²

When the Russian army withdrew from Chechnya in 1992, it left behind a considerable weapons arsenal. In 1994, Russian President Boris Yeltsin deployed forces to Chechnya, anticipating a "small-scale war" and an easy victory. However, Chechen resistance turned out to be much stronger than expected, and in August 1996 guerrilla fighters, lead by Aslan Maskhadov, were able to re-capture the capital Grozny. By early 1997 the Russian troops had

* **Dr. Martin Malek** is (civilian) researcher and CIS area specialist at the Institute for Peace Support and Conflict Management of the National Defence Academy in Vienna (Austria).

¹ Glinskiy, Dmitriy, *Musulmane Rossii: obretenie politicheskoy subektivnosti. Konstitutsionnoe pravo: Vostochnoevropeyskoe Obozrenie*, vol. 11, nos. 1-2, Winter/Spring 2002, pp. 12-25, here p.14; also cf. Malashenko, Aleksey, "Islamskoe vozrozhdenie v sovremennoy Rossii". Moskva: Moskovskiy Tsentr Karnegi (1998), p. 165.

² Chechnya – Constitution, <http://www.oefre.unibe.ch/law/icl/cc01000.html> (accessed 30 October 2006).

withdrawn. In late summer 1999, Yeltsin and his new Prime Minister Vladimir Putin launched the second Chechen war which is still ongoing.

Especially at the beginning of the second war criticism was voiced in Iran. For instance, Ayatollah Abdul Vaez-Javadi-Amoli said on 15 January 2000 that Russia “will be destroyed and disgraced if it continues with the killing of the innocent Muslims in Chechnya.”³ At the same time Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi told Russia’s Deputy Foreign Minister Grigori Karasin that a continuation of the war in Chechnya would be “unacceptable for the Islamic world” and added his concern about the “picture from Russia to the region and the Muslim world.”⁴ Nevertheless, such and similar statements had no obvious consequences for the official bilateral relationship. In early January 2000, President Sayed Mohammed Khatami congratulated Putin on assuming office as (then provisional) President and expressed hopes to further intensify contacts with Moscow. On 14 January 2000, the Russian state news agency RIA Novosti commented on Iran’s position as follows: “It is very important for Moscow that Iran has again confirmed its pro-Russian position on Chechnya [...] and recognizes its right to punish terrorists and bandits” (i.e., the Chechen rebels, M.M.).⁵ The then Secretary of Russia’s Security Council Sergei Ivanov (today Minister of Defence and First Deputy Prime Minister) thanked Iran for its “by and large constructive approach.”⁶

Also later, Iranian criticism of Russia’s Chechnya policy was occasionally voiced, as for example by the newspaper *Dschomchürjye eslami*, allegedly loyal to Iran’s spiritual leader Ayatollah Ali Chamenei, on the occasion of a hostage-taking in a Moscow musical theatre in October 2002. Also the moderate Russian press reacted to that with headlines such as “The Ayatollahs Supported Terrorists.”⁷ Sceptical remarks from Iranian officials on Russia’s war in Chechnya were immediately softened by reservations: Chechnya is an “internal affair” of Russia whose territorial integrity Iran would, of course, respect. Neither for Iran nor any other Muslim country the recognition of Chechnya’s self-proclaimed independence of 1991 was ever a serious point of discussion.⁸

Hamid Reza Assefi, a representative of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, announced in 2003:

*“We tolerate all measures of Russia that are peaceful in nature and aimed at respecting and guaranteeing the rights of Russia’s multinational population, including the Muslims. Iran welcomes the respect the Russian Federation pays to the many representatives of the Islamic faith and, by all means, considers the problem with the Chechen Republic to be an internal Russian affair.”*⁹

³ Quoted from: RFE/RL Iran Report, vol. 3, no. 6, 7 February 2000.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Sekretar Sovbeza RF provel peregovory s Sekretarem Vysshogo Soveta Natsionalnoy Bezopasnosti Irana. Obshcheekonomicheskie novosti, yanvar 13, 2000 g., <http://www.innov.ru/news/en/2000/01-13.htm> (accessed 11 November 2007).

⁷ Yusin, Maskim, Ayatolly podderzhali terroristov. Izvestiya, 31 October 2002, p. 2.

⁸ Only the Taliban in Afghanistan had “recognized” Chechnya (in January 2000), though their own regime was not internationally recognized.

⁹ RIA “Novosti”, 2 March 2003, <http://www.memo.ru/hr/hotpoints/caucas1/msg/2003/03/m1694.htm> (accessed 13 November 2007).

Therefore, the Chairman of the Federation Council (Upper House of Parliament), Sergei Mironov (a Putin loyal), had no difficulty with telling the Iranian Parliament in 2004 that Russia “greatly appreciated” Iran’s “principle position” on the situation in Chechnya. According to Mironov, Iran’s support for “the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Russian Federation” would have positive effects on the present and future bilateral relations.¹⁰ Iran also received credit in Russia for not admitting representatives of Chechen separatists (as did several CIS and European countries).¹¹

According to the German Caucasus expert Uwe Halbach, Middle East governments – including Iran – were, in general, (even) more reluctant to criticise Russia’s war in Chechnya than officials in the EU and North America. Some Islamic states (including Iran) and organisations provided humanitarian aid to Chechen refugees. “Volunteers” from several Islamic states joined the Chechen rebels in their fight.¹² However, Chechnya never had the “attraction” that other conflicts with Islamic involvement have had. In general, the reactions in the Islamic world to the events in Chechnya were “by far not as strong as the ‘Islamic solidarity’ claim might have suggested.”¹³ Chechen President Maskhadov, undoubtedly a secular-oriented leader, in vain approached even Pope John Paul II for help, as the Islamic world appeared to be indifferent to the fate of the Chechen people.

The death toll figures in Chechnya since 1994 vary strongly, depending on the source and reach up to 200,000. In any case, one can work on the assumption that tens of thousands of civilians were killed and that hundreds of thousands had to flee their homes – in a Republic that had approximately one million inhabitants in 1991. From both wars there are reports about numerous massacres, committed by Russian troops against the civilian population, and about random shootings and bombings of gathered crowds as well as about the establishment of “filtration camps” (where people of both sexes and all ages were sent, who were accused by Russian troops of having connections with the rebels). At the beginning of the second war in Chechnya, Russian troops and intelligence services systematically targeted alleged and actual symbols of the Islamisation that had taken place in the meantime. Mosques¹⁴ and even cemeteries were damaged or destroyed. The possession of a copy of the Koran alone could lead to arrest for allegedly “sympathising with the rebels”, and men wearing beards could raise suspicion of being “Wahhabis.”

¹⁰ Quoted from: Mironov: v Rossii vysoko tsenyat pozitsiyu Irana po Chechne. RIA Novosti, 12 December 2004, <http://rian.ru/politics/20041212/758245.html> (accessed 11 March 2007).

¹¹ Pylev, Alexey I., Iran i Rossiya kak strategicheskie soyuzniki: istoriya i sovremennoe polozhenie, <http://www.evrazia.org/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=969> (accessed 11 August 2006).

¹² The Kremlin occasionally propagated that the Chechen resistance was steered from the outside and would, therefore, not be autochthonous. It also tried to create the impression that the Russian Armed Forces were confronted with an entire Islamist “army of terrorists,” in which foreign mercenaries play a substantial role. In fact, there had probably never been more than two to three hundred foreign fighters in the Republic (Malashenko, Aleksey and Trenin, Dmitriy, “Vremya yuga. Rossiya v Chechne, Chechnya v Rossii”. Moskva: Gendalf [2002], pp. 103-104). By no means, all of those came from the Islamic world – there were, for example, also Ukrainian nationalists. And it was particularly unwelcome in Russia that ethnic Russians (often Islamic converts) fought with the rebels, though their number was undoubtedly small.

¹³ Halbach, Uwe, Regionale Dimensionen des zweiten Tschetschenienkriegs. Teil II: Die südliche GUS und die “islamische Welt”. Aktuelle Analysen des BIOst, no. 2, 2000, p. 4; Halbach, Uwe, Russlands muslimische Ethnien und Nachbarn, in Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte, B 16-17, 2003, pp. 39-46, here p. 45.

¹⁴ In concrete terms, e.g., a mosque in Vedeno (Shamil Basayev’s hometown), a mosque in Starye Atagi built by Dudaev’s successor Selimkhan Yandarbiev, and a mosque in the centre of Gudermes.

In Russia the terms “Wahhabi” and “Wahhabism” were gradually stripped of their analytical content and came to be frequently used catchwords and ciphers for all movements that Moscow perceived as radical, militant, or terrorist and “steered from the outside” within the “Islamic renaissance” that was taking place in the “post-Soviet space.”¹⁵ In addition, both terms point to Saudi Arabia, which in Russia is all too readily accused of financing Islamic extremists in the CIS and particularly in Chechnya, while they simultaneously exclude Iran.¹⁶

A researcher at the Moscow-based Institute for World Economics and International Relations (IMEMO) of the Russian Academy of Sciences noted: “In today’s Russia the attitude towards ‘Wahhabism’ as an enemy ideology recalls the attitude of the official authorities during the Soviet era towards ‘Zionism’.”¹⁷ Moscow and its Chechen accomplices are seeking to make a distinction between “evil” “Wahhabism” and “good” (because pro-Russian) “traditional Islam.” According to prevailing Russian opinion, those who declare jihad on separatist rebels in Chechnya are “good Muslims,” whereas those who conversely declare jihad on “Russian infidels” and “national traitors” (a hint at Chechens siding with Moscow) are “Wahhabis” and, therefore, have to be fought and “wiped out.” There was, however, a general “Chechenisation” of Russian perceptions of Islam, which manifested itself in anti-Islamic prejudices within parts of Russia’s Slavic population in general and, in concrete terms, within the political elite and articulated itself in reprisals against believing Muslims who obviously had nothing to do with the Chechen rebels. As a result, not only in contested Chechnya, but also in other North Caucasus regions Muslims faced grievances or the ban of Arabic and Islam instruction as well as collective mockery, harassments and even arrests, when praying in mosques.¹⁸

On the surface, Iran’s official reaction was surprisingly indifferent to those events. Neither the war in Chechnya itself nor Russia’s related self-presentation in international relations harmed the relations between Tehran and Moscow. According to Alexei Malashenko and Dmitri Trenin, the first war in Chechnya did not overshadow Russian-Iranian “pragmatic” cooperation and the second war even unchained “the hands of those Russians who advocated closer ties with Iran. This process brought the interests of Russian military leaders as well as of circles of the weapons industry and the nuclear industry to the fore.”¹⁹ Cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed, initially published in a Danish provincial newspaper in late 2005 and early 2006, provoked much more indignation and violent protests in many Islamic states (including Iran) than did the Russian war in Chechnya with its enormous death toll and property damage.

Some perceived Iran’s Chechnya policy as a violation of the Iranian constitution, which obliges Iran to be “fraternally committed” to all Muslims and provide “unsparing support to the *mustad’afin*²⁰ of the world” (article 3, paragraph 16). Official Tehran justified its stance towards the Chechen conflict mainly by pointing out that the rebels were backed by “external forces” which were enemies of Iran and Russia alike. “In doing so, Tehran makes practically no effort to conceal the fact that by such forces it means, among others, the U.S. and

¹⁵ The term “Wahhabism” actually refers to the extremely purist teachings of Ibn Abd al Wahhab (18th century).

¹⁶ Halbach, Uwe, “Wahhabiten” im Kaukasus und in Zentralasien. Religiöse Konflikte an der Südflanke Russlands. Aktuelle Analysen des BIOst, no. 19, 12 May 1998.

¹⁷ Glinskiy, op. cit., p. 24.

¹⁸ Perović, Jeronim, Am Abgrund. Fehlentwicklungen im Nordkaukasus. Osteuropa, vol. 56, no. 7, 2006, pp. 33-53, here p. 51.

¹⁹ Malashenko and Trenin, op. cit., p. 204-205.

²⁰ In this context, the Arab word can be translated as “the weak” and “the oppressed.”

Turkey.”²¹ These two countries as well as NATO were repeatedly accused by Russian politicians and the press of supporting the rebels or at least wanting to use the Chechen conflict for their own aims. It is, therefore, a widespread opinion that “neither Russia nor Chechnya needs war and instability in Chechnya, regardless of their views. It is the West who needs the war, in order to create an internal enemy image in the form of Muslims within Russia and turn Muslims and Orthodox Christians against each other.”²²

Some observers also explained Iran’s position of straddling the fence between indifference and de facto partisanship with Moscow, regarding the conflict in Chechnya, with Iran’s own multi-ethnicity and voiced the opinion that the Azerbaijanis in the north-west, the Arabs in the south, the Balujis in the south-east, and the Turkmen in the north-east might also develop separatist or irredentist tendencies.²³ In the “Treaty about the Basis of Mutual Relations and Principles of Cooperation between the Russian Federation and the Islamic Republic of Iran” both countries obliged themselves not to open their respective territory to “aggressions, diversions and separatist activities” (article 2).²⁴ This is merely a declaration, though, for Russia has signed many bilateral and multilateral documents within the CIS containing references to respecting territorial integrity, while, at the same time, it supports armed separatists, especially in Moldova (Transnistria) and Georgia (Abkhazia, South Ossetia).

In late 2005, the British newspaper *Sunday Telegraph* claimed to have knowledge of incidents which would equally violate the aforementioned passage of the Russian-Iranian Principle Agreement: Referring to “Western intelligence reports”, the newspaper read that in the “Revolutionary Guards’ Imam Ali training camp, located close to Tajrish Square in Tehran”, Chechen rebels were secretly trained “in sophisticated terror techniques to enable them to carry out more effective attacks against Russian forces”. In addition, the Chechens would receive “ideological and political instruction by hardline Iranian mullahs at Qom.” All this would be taking place with the knowledge and approval of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.²⁵ – Later, however, the *Sunday Telegraph* report only met with denials and criticism. The Chechen separatist Kavkazcenter website called the report “complete nonsense” and added:

“It has long been common knowledge that in relation to Chechnya, Tehran has always taken a clear and unambiguous position. Iran in every way justifies Moscow's occupation of Chechnya and will never put its military-economic ties with Russia under threat because of the Chechens.”²⁶

²¹ Shakaryants, Sergey, *Aspekty rossiysko-iranskogo sotrudnichestva s uchetom ego voennoy sostavlyayushchey. Armenian Center for National and International Studies (Yerevan)*, 29 August 2000, <http://www.acnis.am/aspects.htm> (accessed 15 May 2001).

²² A. V. Polosin, Head of the Association of Islamic Journalists in Russia (and former Russian-Orthodox priest), quoted from: *Rossiya i islamskiy mir – problemy, predposylki i perspektivy dolgosrochnogo vzaimodeystviya. Vestnik Analitiki*, no. 1(19), 2005, pp. 211-224, p. 220.

²³ Samii, A. William, *Iran and Chechnya: Realpolitik at Work. Middle East Policy*, vol. VIII, no. 1, March 2001, pp. 48-57.

²⁴ *Rossiyskaya Federatsiya – Federalnyy Zakon o Ratifikatsii dogovora ob osnovach vzaimootnosheniy i printsipach sotrudnichestva mezhdru Rossiyskoy Federatsiey i Islamskoy Respublikoy Iran.* <http://www.akdi.ru/GD/proekt/088099GD.SHTM> (accessed 23 October 2006).

²⁵ Coughlin, Con, *Teheran ‘secretly trains’ Chechens to fight in Russia.* *Sunday Telegraph*, 27 November 2005, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2005/11/27/wchech27.xml> (accessed 13 November 2007).

²⁶ *Report of Iranian Training of Chechens Greeted Sceptically.* *Eurasia Daily Monitor – The Jamestown Foundation*, vol. 6, issue 46, 8 December 2005.

The pro-Kremlin Moscow-based newspaper *Izvestija* talked about “another shot fired in the information war that the West is waging against the Iranian regime,” adding that “a quarrel between Tehran and Moscow would make the Western diplomats’ work easier.”²⁷ Likewise, the Iranian Embassy in Moscow combined its rejection of the report with a (further) statement that it saw the Chechen problem “as being in the competence of Russia and its internal matter.” There was only the very cautiously phrased additional suggestion that “the government of Russia and the sides to the conflict should put forward all proposals for settling the problems.”²⁸ Already in 2002, the Iranian Embassy in Moscow had “categorically” rejected a statement by the convicted criminal Beslan Gantamirov, a pro-Russian Chechen politician and high-ranking staff member of the office of the Presidential Plenipotentiary envoy to the Southern Federal District (to which Chechnya belongs), according to which Tehran would support the “terrorist activities of Chattab” (a Chechen fighter of Arab origin who was killed by the Russians in 2002).²⁹

The Chechen Problem in the Organisation of the Islamic Conference

In 1994, separatist President Dzhokhar Dudaev tried to achieve the accession of Chechnya into the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC). However, the initiative failed. The final communiqué of the 7th Conference of the Heads of State and Governments of the OIC in Casablanca in December 1994 dedicated only one single sentence to Chechnya, which did not contain any direct criticism of Moscow: “The Conference expressed its concern over the recent developments in Chechnya and called on all concerned parties to exercise restraint and avoid more bloodshed and to work for a peaceful settlement of the problem, in the framework of the territorial integrity of the Russian Federation.”³⁰

At the beginning of the second war in Chechnya in 1999, Iran was chairing the OIC and made ostensible efforts to keep the role of the OIC as a means of criticising Moscow as small as possible. From that two well-known Russian scholars deduced that Iran, as chair of the OIC, had “supported Moscow and its policy in Chechnya.”³¹ Russia’s highest political establishment saw it similarly, because Mironov thanked Iran for its role in assessing the “developments in Chechnya” in the framework of the OIC.³² Kharrazi offered Russia, provided it would give its “permission,” to negotiate a ceasefire in Chechnya on behalf of the OIC, but it was easy for

²⁷ Bausin, Aleksey, Anglichane otyskali bazy chechenskikh boevikov v Irane. *Izvestiya*, 30 November 2005, <http://www.izvestia.ru/world/article3022797/> (accessed 5 October 2006).

²⁸ Chechnya – eto vnutrennee delo Rossii. Posolstvo Irana v Moskve oproverkaet... Zayavlenie Posolstva Irana v Moskve, 7 December 2005, <http://centrasia.org/newsA.php4?st=1133922720> (accessed 23 October 2006).

²⁹ Zayavlenie posolstva Irana v Rossii. Kavkazskiy uzel, 30 April 2002, <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/newstext/news/id/493671.html> (accessed 23 October 2006).

³⁰ The Seventh Islamic Summit Conference (Session of Fraternity and Revival). Casablanca, Kingdom Of Morocco, 11-13 Rajab 1415h (13-15 December, 1994), <http://www.oic-oci.org/english/conf/is/7/7th-is-summit.htm#FINAL%20COMMUNIQUE> (accessed 25 February 2007).

³¹ Malashenko and Trenin, op. cit., p. 205.

³² Mironov: v Rossii..., op. cit.

Moscow to reject the proposal – on the very basis of Iran’s own assessment of the Chechen conflict as “interior Russian matter.”³³

Neither Iran nor the OIC felt affronted. Criticism of the “commensurability” of the Russian military operation and regrets about the large number of civilian casualties continued to be moderate. The OIC positions on the question of Chechnya (including those adopted in Tehran) contained mostly factual to reserved and carefully formulated wordings and expressions of “concern” or “grave concern” as well as calls for negotiations, but no ultimatums or emotional criticism of Russia; they were always accompanied by the “respect for the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the Russian Federation and non-interference in its internal affairs.”³⁴ This was in clear contrast to the regular biting OIC statements concerning other crisis zones with Islamic involvement (especially the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, although there were far fewer casualties than in Chechnya). OIC observers even called the more than controversial election in August 2004 of Moscow’s protégé Alu Alkhanov to President of Chechnya – who allegedly gained 73.67% of the votes (on an 85.25% turnout) – “legitimate.”³⁵

Chechnya never played an important role in the OIC framework, even though several member states made it clear that they would have wished an active and critical position of their organisation in this respect. Particularly Saudi Arabia has been accused by Russian sources of having acted in favour of separatist Chechnya within the organisation. Like in Western Europe and North America, the interest of the Islamic world in the conflict steadily decreased with its duration. In 2005 – i.e. during the second war in Chechnya – Russia obtained observer status in the OIC. Iran was one of the first OIC members to push for this, for which Putin thanked Ahmadinedjad profusely at a meeting in June 2006.³⁶ During the Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers in Baku in the same month, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov represented Russia as an observer.

Russia’s “Fight Against Terrorism” in Chechnya

High-ranking Russian officials were and are heard saying that Russia was the main target of international terrorism. The “threat from the south” – i.e. alleged or actual attempts of Islamic fundamentalists and terrorists to gain a foothold in the Central-Asian CIS Republics as well as in Russia itself – was intermittently the main topic in Russia. Chechnya is considered to be one of the focal points in that respect. The first war there (1994-1996) was officially described in Moscow as an “operation to restore the constitutional order.” This phrase hardly came up, however, during the second war (since 1999). Instead, Russian officials as well as directly or indirectly Kremlin-controlled media consistently spoke of an “anti-terror operation” (or a “fight against bandits”). However, one must bear in mind that the Russian leadership considers any Chechen resistance against its predominantly violent repression to be “terrorism.” With

³³ So did the Minister for Federal Affairs and Nationalities Alexander Blokhin, see RFE/RL Iran Report, vol. 3, no. 12, 20 March 2000.

³⁴ Cf. e.g.: Resolution no.13/27-P – On the Situation in Chechnya. Adopted by the Twenty-seventh Session of the Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 27-30 June 2000. A verbatim quote is included in Resolution no.5/30-P – On the Situation in Chechnya. Adopted by the thirtieth Session of the Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers. Tehran, Islamic Republic of Iran, 28-30 May 2003.

³⁵ Trifkovic, Srdja, Chechnya: Time For The U.S. to End Ambiguity. *Chronicles Magazine*, 1 September 2004, <http://www.chroniclesmagazine.org/News/Trifkovic04/NewsST090104.html> (accessed 25 February 2007).

³⁶ Skosyrev, Vladimir, NATO dlya bednykh. *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 16 January 2006, p. 6.

consistency Moscow does not regard the rebels' activities as combat or war operations but as "terrorism." The terms "terrorists" and "bandits" are intended to discredit the rebels as criminals abroad and at home and deny that they have legitimate political reasons to act. In doing so, Moscow also justifies its refusal to enter into any kind of negotiations.

The term "terrorism," as predominantly understood by the Russian elite as well as the public, is strongly focused on the "anti-terror operation" in Chechnya. Minister of Defence Ivanov made this clear when he said that Saddam Hussein's Iraq could not have anything to do with terrorism simply because no Iraqis were identified among the fighters from 30 to 40 states on the side of the Chechen separatists.³⁷ About Iran Ivanov said that it was not supporting any "terrorist activities" in Chechnya while "other Middle East countries did."³⁸ This was obviously a reference to Saudi Arabia.

Russian human rights activists, among them the well-known NGO Memorial, point out the high casualty tolls of the wars in Chechnya and, in turn, accuse the Kremlin of "state terrorism,"³⁹ but, with that, belong to a tiny and politically unimportant minority. Also in Western Europe and North America politicians, the media and political observers have used this accusation only as exceptions. Particularly after 9/11 in the U.S., Moscow gained success in its efforts to present its intervention in Chechnya as "contribution to the fight against international terrorism." It denies that the conflict has deeper roots and strives to put its war in Chechnya on the same level as the ongoing U.S.-led combat against the Taliban in Afghanistan and Al-Qaeda since 2001, and to give the impression that Russian Armed Forces were confronted with an entire "Islamist terrorist army" or with an "Islamist aggression." Moscow has repeatedly claimed that Al-Qaeda was responsible for attacks and hostage-takings (as, e.g. in a school in Beslan in the autonomous Republic of North Ossetia in 2004). However, there is poor evidence for that. Chechnya has always been at the low end of Osama bin Laden's list of priorities. In Jihad texts and videos released on the Internet it rarely appears as individual conflict but is usually included in listings of crises with Muslim participation, anywhere between Bosnia-Herzegovina and the southern Philippines. Russia is hardly ever condemned, nor its downfall wished for in the way, as is the case with the U.S., Israel and other "crusaders." Jihadist texts sometimes even accuse the U.S. of having supported the Russian military interventions in Chechnya.⁴⁰ In fact, this allegation cannot be completely rejected.

³⁷ Babaeva, Svetlana, Sergey Ivanov: "Nam obyavlena vojna bez frontov i granits" (Interview). *Izvestiya*, 5 November 2002, p. 2. – The \$25,000 reward Saddam Hussein paid to the families of Palestinian suicide bombers in Israel was clearly not seen as supporting terrorism by Ivanov. However, the Russian law "About the Fight Against Terrorism" (enacted in 1998) states that financing terrorist groups counts as "terrorist activity." – Saddam Hussein had always clearly supported Russia's "anti-terror operations" in Chechnya. As revenge for this representatives of the Chechen rebels rendered support to the U.S.-led war in Iraq in 2003 – despite Washington putting three Chechen factions on its list of terrorist groups. The official reason for this was that U.S. citizens as well as U.S. interests are endangered by their activities. However, Chechen rebels have never attracted attention by attacking U.S. targets. In fact, Washington wanted to convince Moscow to vote for an UN resolution legitimising the intervention in Iraq. But this was never an option for Russia.

³⁸ "Rußland ist nicht entscheidend" (Interview). *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 6 February 2006, p. 7.

³⁹ Saidov, Arslan, "Konterror nuzhen lish konkretnym chinovnikam dlya usileniya svoikh pozitsiy" (Interview with Alexander Cherkasov), *Svobodanews.ru*, 31 January 2007, <http://www.svobodanews.ru/Article/2007/01/31/20070131145244013.html> (accessed 11 November 2007).

⁴⁰ Kepel, Gilles, and Milelli, Jean-Pierre, *Al Qaida – Text des Terrors*. München/Zürich: Piper Verlag (2006), pp. 67, 108, 124, 379.

Excursus: Putin About Islam

Putin has shown himself to be not very familiar with matters concerning international or only Russian Islam. In 2000, for instance, he said in an interview on CNN that “mainly Shi’ites” lived in the North Caucasus and “that caused a certain revolt on the part of the population there.”⁴¹ Indeed the Shiites (particularly Azerbaijanis and a small part of the Lezgins and Dargins in Dagestan) are a disappearing minority in the North Caucasus region.⁴² That same year the Russian President warned, with obvious exaggeration, of the threat caused by Chechen separatists: “If extremist forces manage to get a hold in the Caucasus, this infection may spread up the Volga River, spread to other republics, and we either face the full Islamization of Russia, or we will have to agree to Russia’s division into several independent states.”⁴³ In 2002 Putin, answering a journalist’s question about Chechnya, said that “Islamic terrorists” wanted to “establish a Caliphate” first in Chechnya and then “in the whole world.”⁴⁴

Also on many other occasions Putin made patronizing comments about Islam, without triggering a sharp reaction from Iran or other Islamic states and organisations. In 2002, answering a question from a reporter about the war in Chechnya, he said that all Christians and allies of the U.S. were threatened by Chechen separatists. According to a version taken from Russian television footage and translated by *The New York Times*, Putin actually said: “If you want to become a complete Islamic radical and are ready to undergo circumcision, then I invite you to Moscow. We are a multidenominational country. We have specialists in this question as well. I will recommend that he carry out the operation in such a way that after it nothing else will grow.”⁴⁵ In 2005, the Russian President being in the Netherlands rejected allegations that the Russian Armed Forces have been too heavy-handed in attempts to put down the rebellion in Chechnya. Then he accused some European leaders of being “more Muslim than Mohammed.”⁴⁶ Nevertheless, on 12 December 2005, at the opening of the Chechen parliament in Grozny – installed by Moscow – Putin declared that “Russia has always been the most faithful, reliable and consistent defender of the Islamic world’s interests.”⁴⁷ On 7 February 2006, Putin called the abovementioned cartoons satirizing the Prophet Mohammed an “inadmissible” provocation against Muslims.⁴⁸

⁴¹ Larry King Live: Russian President Vladimir Putin Discusses Domestic and Foreign Affairs. Aired 8 September 2000, <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0009/08/lkl.00.html> (accessed 1 March 2007).

⁴² Koptev, Dmitriy, *Voprosy teologii*. *Izvestiya*, 12 September 2000, p. 3.

⁴³ Quoted from: Waldman, Amy, *Shackles Off, Russia’s Muslims are still chafing*. *The New York Times*, 9 November 2001, p. 8.

⁴⁴ Quoted from: Reut, Andrey, *Putin predlozhl Evrope obrezanie*. *Gazeta* (The Daily Telegraph / The Sunday Telegraph), 12 November 2002, <http://www.gzt.ru/print.php?p=world/2002/11/12/125959.html> (accessed 7 September 2006).

⁴⁵ Quoted from: Fuller, Thomas, *Hint of castrating Islamic radicals gets lost in translation: Putin’s words spark confusion at EU*. *International Herald Tribune*, 13 November 2002, http://www.iht.com/articles/2002/11/13/putin_ed3.php (accessed 6 February 2007).

⁴⁶ Quoted from: Hanuska, Karl Emerick, *Putin, Dutch PM Spar Over War in Chechnya*. *The Moscow Times*, 3 November 2005, p. 1.

⁴⁷ Quoted from: Kosachev, Konstantin, *Islamofobiya kak politicheskiy faktor*. *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 22 December 2005, p. 2.

⁴⁸ Quoted from: RFE/RL Newline, vol. 10, no. 24, Part I, 8 February 2006.

At the same time, according to Putin, Russia was preventing the expansion of Islamic fundamentalism into Europe.⁴⁹ Against this backdrop, he practically justified the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan: At the time, the USSR was “the first to resist Islamic fundamentalism and organised terrorism.”⁵⁰

Conclusion

The Russian war in Chechnya has never posed a big problem for Tehran. Iranian “nuclear trade with Russia flourished particularly during those years in which the Chechen capital Grozny was levelled to the ground.”⁵¹ Tehran’s pragmatic attitude towards Moscow’s activities in Chechnya did not go unnoticed (Svante Cornell: “Iran’s attitude to the Chechen conflict has reaffirmed the predominance of realpolitik in Iranian foreign policy”⁵², Clement Therme: “This abandoning of Islamic solidarity for the profit of a fragile economic and strategic partnership with Moscow is proof that the foreign policy of Tehran isn’t completely ideological”⁵³). Russia itself hardly acts less “pragmatic.” It established close ties to theocratic Iran, regardless of the fact that Islam is viewed with suspicion in large parts of Russia’s Slavic population and its political elite. Many perceive Islam as a religion and ideology that is seen in Russia as weakening Moscow’s hold.

However, common interests preponderate between Russia and Iran. Above all, they share an opposition towards what they perceive as “expansion of the West” – and particularly of the U.S. and NATO – in the CIS, the Caspian Basin and the Near and Middle East. This common approach will not change in the foreseeable future. Other global political actors, including the EU, should adjust to this attitude.

⁴⁹ See Melkov, Sergey, “Transformatsiya voennoy politiki Rossii pod vliyaniem islamskogo faktora”, in Aleksey Malashenko and Marta Brill Olcott (Eds.), *Islam na postsovetском prostranstve: vzglyad iznutri*. Moskva: Moskovskiy Tsentr Karnegi, Art-Biznes-Tsentr (2001), p. 45-71, here p. 62.

⁵⁰ Vylegzhanin, Rostislav, *Afgan opyat nasha slava*. Moskovskie novosti, 13 February 2004, <http://www.mn.ru/print.php?2004-5-46> (accessed 4 October 2006). Many post-Soviet publications still or again refer to the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989 as “provision of internationalist assistance to the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan” – as does the deputy head of Putin’s Presidential Executive Office and ex-KGB staff member Viktor Ivanov in his official biography (Pomoshchniki Prezidenta. Ivanov Viktor Petrovich, http://president.kremlin.ru/state_subj/27809.shtml [accessed 10 January 2007]). – The military newspaper *Krasnaya zvezda* in early 2007 published statements by General Valentin Varennikov (Ret.) who had spent five years with the Soviet expeditionary corps in Afghanistan. He kept to the official version at the time, claiming that the USSR deployed its troops “on Afghanistan’s request.” Despite “U.S. fuelled provocations by the Mujaheddin,” the Soviet troops “showed patience, generosity, courage, and incredible self-sacrifice.” The Soviet Army wanted “the people of Afghanistan to live in peace.” And: “We never intended to harm the civil population” (Knyazkov, Sergey, General armii V. I. Varennikov: *Nas po-prezhnemu zovut shuravi*. *Krasnaya zvezda*, 14 February 2007, http://www.redstar.ru/2007/02/14_02/3_01.html [accessed 14 February 2007]).

⁵¹ Randow, Gero von and Ladurner, Ulrich, “Die iranische Bombe. Hintergründe einer globalen Gefahr”. Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe (2006), p. 102.

⁵² Cornell, Svante E., *Iran and the Caspian Region: The Domestic and International Context of Iranian Policy*. Cornell Caspian Consulting, Caspian Brief, no. 15, May 2001, p. 10.

⁵³ Therme, Clement, *Tehran and the Chechen Question*. Caucaz.com, 26 September 2006, http://www.caucaz.com/home_eng/breve_contenu_imprim.php?id=262 (accessed 13 November 2006).