

Caucasus Emirate

AT A GLANCE

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HOW TO CITE

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SUMMARY

Formed: 2007

Disbanded: Group is active.

First Attack: June 5, 2009: The Caucasus Emirate's Dagestani Jamaat Shariat faction conducted a sniper attack on the Dagestan Republic Ministry of the Interior (MVD) chief, Aldigirei Magomedtagirov, in Dagestan (1 killed, 7 wounded).¹

Last Attack: April 3, 2014: Caucasus Emirate conducted an attack in Yandi village in Chechnya using a concealed explosive device to destroy a combat vehicle of Russian security forces (4 dead, 7 wounded).²

OVERVIEW

The Caucasus Emirate (CE) is a Sunni nationalist organization established in October 2007 to form an independent North Caucasus region ruled under Shariah. It was founded when the last president of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, the self-proclaimed secessionist government in Chechnya, dissolved the group in order to create an overarching organization that incorporated all the militant groups in the North Caucasus. The Caucasus Emirate has maintained strong ties with Al Qaeda and the Taliban. It is responsible for many high-profile attacks, including the 2010 Moscow metro bombings, 2011 Domodedovo Airport attack, and the 2009 bombing of the Ingush president's motorcade. In late 2014, several members of the CE's top leadership began defecting to the Islamic State. Today, the organization is severely disorganized or defunct, and operates mainly in Syria through affiliated groups.

NARRATIVE SUMMARY

The Caucasus Emirate (CE), also known as Imarat Kavkaz, is a Sunni nationalist organization established in October 2007. The group arose when Doku Umarov, then-emir of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria (CRI), the self-proclaimed secessionist government of Chechnya, resigned from his position and transformed the CRI into the Emirate. Through the Emirate, Umarov allegedly sought to establish an overarching organization that incorporates all the militant groups in the North Caucasus. In a departure from the nationalistic goals of its more moderate predecessor, the Caucasus Emirate aims to establish an independent North Caucasus region ruled under Shariah.³ In line with the goals of Al Qaeda (AQ), Caucasus Emirate is committed to the global jihadi movement and seeks to take back lands beyond the Caucasus that were historically Muslim.⁴

The group consists of six vilayets, or provinces, that report to their respective emirs who, in turn, report to the overall emir of the CE. These vilayets are located in the North Caucasus: Chechnya, Ingushetia and North Ossetia, Nogay Steppe (Northern Krasnodar Krai and Stavropol Krai), Cherkess and Southern Krasnodar Krai, Dagestan, and Kabardino-Balkaria and Karachay.⁵ Originally, the Caucasus Emirate also served as an umbrella organization for other terrorist groups in the North Caucasus, including the Yarmuk Jamaat (Kabardino-Balkaria), Shariat Jamaat (Dagestan), and Ingush Jamaat. In 2009, the CE also restored the martyr brigade Riyadus-Salikhin, as a unit of the Emirate.⁶

The Caucasus Emirate openly declared allegiance to the global jihadi movement in April 2009 at a meeting of the group's top leaders in Chechnya. This declaration likely arose due to heavy influence from Al Qaeda, the Taliban, and Islamic jihad.⁷ Despite this change in rhetoric, the organization continued to focus its operations on attacking targets in the North Caucasus and Russia. While the 2010 Moscow metro bombings and 2011 Domodedovo Airport attack indicated renewed interest in global jihad, the Caucasus Emirate has not fully integrated its global aspirations with its regional operations.⁸

In February 2012, Umarov ordered a halt on attacks against civilian targets in response to protests against Russian President Vladimir Putin.⁹ He rescinded this order in July 2013 and encouraged members of the Emirate to strike the Winter Olympics in Sochi. In December 2013, members of Vilayat Dagestan subsequently carried out two suicide bombings in Volgograd. In March 2014, Umarov was killed by Russian security forces and succeeded by Ali Abu Muhammad al Dagestani.¹⁰

While the Caucasus Emirate remained closely aligned with Al Qaeda, some of its lower-level members began defecting from the group to join the Islamic State (IS) from 2012. The defections of the CE's top leadership began in December 2014, when two emirs, including Asilderov, leader of CE's division in Dagestan, pledged their loyalty to IS and Baghdadi. They were quickly followed by several other emirs, including emir of the Chechen vilayat, Byutukaev, and emir of the Ingush vilayet. Baghdadi allegedly accepted their pledge, and the former CE emirs declared themselves part of the Vilayat Kavkaz, the new regional IS affiliate, in July 2015.¹¹ Since the death of its last top emir

Suleymanov in August 2015, the Emirate has not announced the appointment of a new leader, suggesting that the organization is severely disorganized or defunct. While the Caucasus Emirate currently has little visible presence in the North Caucasus, most of its armed activities have shifted to Syria, through affiliated groups.¹²

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

A. LEADERSHIP

Doku Khamatovich Umarov (October 2007 to March 2014): Umarov was the founder and first emir of the Caucasus Emirate, which unites the North Caucasus jamaats under one umbrella organization. Umarov previously served as de facto president of the Emirate's predecessor, the CRI, and organized several major attacks, including the 2004 Beslan school siege and 2010 Moscow metro bombings, and the 2011 Domodedovo Airport bombing.¹³ He served as a field commander rather than an ideologue. The U.S. State Department declared Umarov a Specially Designated terrorist in June 2010.¹⁴ He was killed by Russian security forces in March 2014.¹⁵

Anzor Astemirov (October 2007 to March 2010): Astemirov, or Emir Sayfullah, served as head of Kabardino-Balkaria's Yarmuk Jamaat, and later emir of the Emirate's Dagestan province. As the top Islamic judge presiding over the Supreme Shariah Court, he held the third highest rank in the Caucasus Emirate. He was credited with proposing the transformation of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria into the Caucasus Emirate and played an important role in shaping the group's ideology.¹⁶

Ali Taziyev (October 2007 - June 9, 2010): Taziyev, or Emir Magas, was the military emir of the Caucasus Emirate and its predecessor, the CRI, and a long-time associate of rebel leaders Basayev and Khattab. He participated in the 2004 Beslan school siege and claimed responsibility for the June 2009 assassination attempt of the Ingush president. He was captured in 2010 by Russian forces.¹⁷

Abu Anas Muhannad (October 2007 to April 21, 2011): Emir Muhannad, also known as Yusuf Mohammed, was a Saudi militant and one of the most respected foreign fighters in the Caucasus Emirate. Muhannad was at the center of a conflict within the Emirate in 2010, when he rejected Umarov's authority after the latter announced then quickly retracted his statement of resignation. Prior to the establishment of the Caucasus Emirate, Muhannad was emir of the Islamic International Peacekeeping Brigade (IIPB).¹⁸

Said Abu Saad Buryatsky (2008 to March 3, 2010): Buryatsky, also known as Alexander Tikhomirov, was a prominent Buryatia ideologue and the main religious leader of the Caucasus Emirate. He gained significant popularity among Russian youth through his YouTube lectures on Islam. Even before joining the Emirate, he strongly supported the idea of defensive jihad and criticized Sufi Muslims. He was killed by Russia security forces in March 2010.¹⁹

Ali Abu Muhammad al Dagestani (2010 to April 2015): Dagestani, also known as Aliaskhab Kebekov, succeeded Umarov as emir of the Caucasus Emirate. Umarov appointed him to be the group's qadi, or senior judge, in 2010 and he became overall emir after Umarov's death in March 2014. He was the first non-Chechen Emir of the Caucasus Emirate.²⁰ He was loyal to Al Qaeda and denounced the defections of Emirate leaders to IS.

Aslan Avgazarovich Butukayev (2010 to June 2015): Butukayev, or Emir Khamzat, served as emir of the Chechen province of the Caucasus Emirate until his defection to the Islamic State in early 2015. He led Riyadus-Salikhin after the group's restoration by the Emirate in 2009 and launched several high profile-attacks, including suicide bombings of the Moscow metro in 2010 and the murder of a former colonel in the Russian Armed Forces in 2011.²¹

Aslam Aslambek Vadalov (July 2010 to unknown): Vadalov, or Emir Aslambek, was commander of the Eastern Front of the Emirate's armed forces, overseeing operations in both Chechnya and Dagestan. He was appointed Umarov's successor in August 2010, but never served as emir as Umarov quickly retracted his statement of resignation. Aslambek temporarily renounced his allegiance to Umarov, but later re-affirmed it in 2011.²²

Hussein Gakayev (July 2011 to January 24, 2013): Gakayev became emir of the Emirate's branch in Chechnya in July 2011. He rescinded his loyalty to Umarov in August 2011, but reasserted it after the death of Muhannad. He was killed by Russian security forces in January 2013.²³

Alim Zankishiev (September 9, 2011 to March 27, 2012): Zankishiev served as emir of Kabardino-Balkaria after the death of Dzhappuyev. He was killed by Russia security forces in March 2012.²⁴

Rustam Asilderov (August 2012 to December 2014): Asilderov, also known as Abu Muhammad al-Kadarsky, served as emir of the Emirate's largest province, in Dagestan. In late 2014, he defected to IS and pledged loyalty to Baghdadi, leading to the exodus of various regional emirs from the Caucasus Emirate. In 2015, IS declared Asilderov head of the new IS regional affiliate, Kavkaz Vilayat.²⁵

Magomed Suleymanov (April 2015 – August 2015): Suleymanov, or Abu Usman al-Gimravii, was Dagestani's successor and one of the last publicly declared emirs of the Caucasus Emirate. He strongly opposed integration of the Emirate into IS. He was killed by Russian forces in August 2015.

B. NAME CHANGES

There are no recorded name changes for this group.

C. SIZE ESTIMATES

- 2010: 400-1500 (American Foreign Policy Council's World Almanac of Islamism)²⁶
- 2011: 750 (U.N. Security Council)²⁷

D. RESOURCES

The primary source of funding for the Caucasus Emirate is local criminal activity. The group extorts regional officials for funds and engages in drug trafficking, robbery, and paid contract killing of businessmen and political rivals. The Caucasus Emirate does not receive much funding from abroad, as most funds are directed towards the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.²⁸

E. GEOGRAPHIC LOCATIONS

Disclaimer: This is a partial list of where the militant organization has bases and where it operates. This does not include information on where the group conducts major attacks or has external influences.

The Caucasus Emirate, which includes members from all the Caucasian republics, has launched attacks throughout the region, including in Chechnya, Dagestan, Ingushetia, and North Ossetia. The group also launched attacks in Moscow and the broader Russian Federation. Beginning in 2012, with the exodus of Caucasian militants to Syria and Iraq, most of the Caucasus Emirate's fighters shifted to these countries. Since the establishment of the IS-affiliated Vilayat Kavkaz, most of the Emirate's armed activities have occurred in Syria, through affiliated groups.²⁹ The Emirate also allegedly has several cells in Europe and the "Near East."³⁰

STRATEGY

A. IDEOLOGY AND GOALS

The Caucasus Emirate is an Islamist-Sunni (Salafi) group based in the North Caucasus. While the Emirate's more moderate predecessor, the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, had the nationalistic goal of secession from the Russian Federation, Caucasus Emirate founder Doku Umarov declared his intent to turn the North Caucasus into an Islamic region under Shariah by expelling the "infidels" that controlled the region. In line with the goals of AQ, Caucasus Emirate is allegedly committed to the global jihadi movement and seeks to take back lands beyond the Caucasus that were historically Muslim.³¹ This change in rhetoric occurred because of heavy influence from Al Qaeda, the Taliban, and Islamic jihad.³² Despite Umarov's remarks, the organization continued to focus its operations on attacking Russian targets. While the 2011 Domodedovo attack and activity in Syria indicated renewed interest in global jihad, the Caucasus Emirate has not fully integrated its global aspirations with its regional operations.³³

B. POLITICAL ACTIVITIES

The Caucasus Emirate does not consider the current governing bodies in the North Caucasus, put in place by the Russian Federation, to be legitimate. It considers itself to be the only legitimate governing body in the North Caucasus and, as such, only recognizes

leaders selected from within the Caucasus Emirate throughout the vilayets of the North Caucasus.³⁴

C. TARGETS AND TACTICS

The Caucasus Emirate targets Russian security forces and other Russian appointed officials that oppose the establishment of an Islamic caliphate in the North Caucasus. After the 2010 Moscow metro bombings and 2011 Domodedovo Airport attack, the organization demonstrated increasing willingness to launch large-scale attacks against civilians, especially “Russian infidels.” While Umarov and Buryatsky stated the group is pursuing global jihad against the West, most of the Caucasus Emirate’s attacks have been domestic, occurring in the North Caucasus or the Russian Federation.³⁵ Since 2015, most of the remaining members of the Caucasus Emirate have been fighting against the Assad regime and international counterterrorist forces in Syria and Iraq.³⁶

The Caucasus Emirate uses suicide bombing as its primary mode of attack. It has also used vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices, armed assaults, and targeted assassinations. The group engages in local criminal activity, including drug trafficking, robberies, and kidnappings for ransom.³⁷

The Caucasus Emirate used the “Kavkaz Center” website as its official medium for publicizing its activities and claiming responsibility for attacks. The website publishes posts in Arabic, English, Russian, Turkish, and Ukrainian.³⁸

MAJOR ATTACKS

Disclaimer: These are some selected major attacks in the militant organization's history. It is not a comprehensive listing but captures some of the most famous attacks or turning points during the campaign.

June 5, 2009: The CE’s Dagestani Jamaat Shariat faction conducted a sniper attack on the Dagestan Republic Ministry of the Interior (MVD) chief, Aldigirei Magomedtagirov, in Dagestan (1 killed, 7 wounded).³⁹

June 22, 2009: Said Buryatsky, the Caucasus Emirate’s main religious leader, and CE unit Riyadus-Salikhin allegedly conducted a suicide bombing of a presidential motorcade that severely wounded the Ingush president, Yunus-Bek Yevkurov (3 killed, several wounded).⁴⁰

November 27, 2009: Caucasus Emirate exploded a train bomb on the Nevsky Express. This was the first time federal officials, including Duma member Sergei Tarasov and head of the Federal Reserves Agency Boris Yevstratkov, were among the victims (27 killed, 100 wounded).⁴¹

March 29, 2010: Directed by Caucasus Emirate’s leader Umarov, two female suicide bombers from Riyadus-Salikhin attacked two major Moscow Metro stations (40 killed, 100 wounded).⁴²

August 29, 2010: Caucasus Emirate directed a suicide attack on the Chechen village of Tsentoroi, the hometown of Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov. The attack was carried out by members of Riyadus-Salikhin (6 killed, 24 wounded).⁴³

January 24, 2011: Caucasus Emirate suicide bombers attacked Domodedovo, Moscow's largest airport. Dozens of police officers and civilians were killed or wounded as militants bomb a lounge near the international departure zone. This was the largest attack by militants in Moscow in 6 years (37 killed, 180 wounded).⁴⁴

June 10, 2011: Butukayev authorized the murder of a former colonel of the Russian Armed Forces, Yuriy D. Budaev, in Moscow (1 killed, unknown wounded).⁴⁵

December 29, 2013: The Vilayat Dagestan province of the Caucasus Emirate conducted a suicide bombing at a train station in Volgograd, Russia (18 killed, 44 wounded).⁴⁶

April 3, 2014: Caucasus Emirate conducted an attack in Yandi village in Chechnya using a concealed explosive device to destroy a combat vehicle of Russian security forces (4 dead, 7 wounded).⁴⁷

INTERACTIONS

A. DESIGNATED/LISTED

- Russian Federation Designated Terrorist Organization: February 8, 2010 to Present.⁴⁸
- U.S. State Department Designation under Presidential Executive Order 13224: May 26, 2011 to Present.⁴⁹
- UNSC "ISIL (Da'esh) & Al-Qaida Sanctions List": July 29, 2011 to Present.⁵⁰
- United Kingdom Home Office Proscribed Terrorist Organization: December 2013 - Present.⁵¹
- Government of Canada Listed Terrorist Entity: December 24, 2013 to Present.⁵²
- United Arab Emirates Cabinet Designated Terrorist Organization: November 2014 to Present.⁵³

B. COMMUNITY RELATIONS

The Caucasus Emirate is popular in the North Caucasus and offers training camps and youth programs for Islamic education. Such programs, funded by foreign terrorist organizations, primarily Al Qaeda, helped to expand its youth cohort across the North Caucasus and the Russian Federation more broadly.⁵⁴

The brutality and human rights abuses of Russian counter-terrorist operations have contributed to the radicalization of North Caucasian youth and increased recruitment of militants from the local community.⁵⁵

C. RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER GROUPS

The Caucasus Emirate is an overarching organization that incorporates many of the militant groups in the North Caucasus, including former militants from the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria (CRI), the Special Purpose Islamic Regiment (SPIR) and the Islamic International Peacekeeping Brigade (IIPB). The Caucasus Emirate also restored Riyadus-Salikhin Reconnaissance and Sabotage Battalion of Chechen Martyrs in late 2009. Since then, the group has allegedly operated under the direct orders of CE leader Umarov as a unit of the Caucasus Emirate and claimed responsibility for several high-profile attacks.⁵⁶

The Caucasus Emirate has strong ideological and operational ties with the Taliban and Al Qaeda (AQ). In line with the goals of AQ, Caucasus Emirate is allegedly committed to the global jihadi movement and seeks to take back lands beyond the Caucasus that were historically Muslim.⁵⁷ Its shift to a jihadist ideology stemmed from its growing reliance on and support from these more globally recognized terrorist organizations.⁵⁸ Moreover, several CE emirs, including Suleymanov and Dagestani, openly declared their loyalty to AQ.

The Caucasus Emirate's links to AQ and the Taliban began prior to its formation in 2007. The main militant groups in the region—the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria (CRI), Riyadus-Salikhin, the Special Purpose Islamic Regiment (SPIR) and the Islamic International Peacekeeping Brigade (IIPB)—all had longstanding ties with AQ and the Taliban. These ties endured after the incorporation of these groups into the Caucasus Emirate.

While the Caucasus Emirate remained closely aligned with Al Qaeda, some of its members began defecting from the group to join the Islamic State (IS) from 2012. The defections of CE's leadership began in December 2014, when Asildarov, emir of CE's division in Dagestan, pledged his loyalty to IS and Baghdadi. The Caucasus Emirate developed a conflictual relationship with the Vilayat Kavkaz, the new IS-regional affiliate established in 2015, under the leadership of former CE emir Asildarov.⁵⁹

D. STATE SPONSORS AND EXTERNAL INFLUENCES

The Caucasus Emirate was heavily influenced by other sub-national groups, especially the Taliban and Al Qaeda. Its shift to a jihadist ideology stemmed from a growing reliance on and support from these more globally recognized terrorist organizations.⁶⁰

MAPS

- North Caucasus
- Global Islamic State

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