

Political Islam in Dagestan

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As we struggle to understand the motives of Islamic extremism and methods for coping with it, we may find it helpful to consider the experience of Dagestan, the southernmost Russian republic that lies between along the Western shore of the Caspian Sea. Dagestan is Russia's most ethnically heterogeneous republic, with thirty-four ethno-linguistic groups together comprising more than 2.1 million people. The extremity of Dagestan's economic diversity is matched by that of its economic deprivation; along with neighboring Chechnya it is Russia's poorest republic. When Islamist extremism was exported from Afghanistan in the late 1980s, Dagestan was the second place that it arrived. Throughout the 1990s Dagestanis struggled with the extremist movement that they call "Wahhabism".¹

I. The Development of Political Islam in Dagestan

Political Islam became an active force in the Soviet Union during perestroika when the Islamic Party of Revival (IPR) organized in Tajikistan and immediately attracted attention with its publication of an influential manifesto entitled "Are We Muslims?" A Dagestani Avar named Ahmed-Kadi Akhtayev, who was residing in Tajikistan, became the IPR Chair. Akhtayev, who was a trained physician and a self-taught theologian moved to Dagestan, where he founded a spiritual and educational institution known as "Islamia", and where he died in 1998. The IPR was organized at the Union level in 1990 at a convention in Astrakhan, on the authority of Akhtayev and through the efforts of leading Dagestani Islamists, including the brothers Abbas and Bagautdin Kebedov. Bagautdin, who is also known as Bagautdin Magomedov, rose to prominence among Dagestani fundamentalists and has been active inside Chechnya in its conflict with Moscow.

Members of the IPR generally are described as “Wahhabis”, though they do not refer to themselves as such. Wahhabism is a fundamentalist Sunni Islamic movement founded in Arabia in the middle eighteenth century by Mohammed Abd-al-Wahhab. Wahhabis reject the later interpretation of the Koran (after the first four *imams*). They believe that the *tariqat*² cult of local sheiks, and proclamations of new holy sites are invalid. With strict adherence to the Koran, Wahhabis neither smoke nor drink, nor shave their beards, nor do they recognize government authority. In keeping with general usage, the IPR may be said to represent a moderate wing of Wahhabism. A somewhat more radical wing of Wahhabism is headed by Ayub Omarov (a.k.a. Ayub Astrakhansky), a Dagestani Avar who lives in Astrakhan. He is one of the few who openly calls himself a Wahhabi and fully dresses the part in a beard, trimmed mustache and short baggy pants. In Astrakhan he is surrounded by a community of the faithful.

Throughout the 1990s, field observations and event data collected by two of the authors suggested that a set of factors contributed to the proliferation of Wahhabism. Evidently, Wahhabism drew its acolytes from diverse points along the socio-economic spectrum of the North Caucasus. First, impoverished residents of rural villages found in it clarity and ideological simplicity, which cut through the cumbersome, and often costly, pseudo-traditions of North Caucasian Islam. For example, these include the obligatory monetary gifts that have surrounded marriage ceremonies during the last six decades. Wahhabism dispensed with many of the rituals that distinguish local Islam, along with the paternalism of traditional spiritual authorities. It resembled other puritanical movements in so far as it denied the role of the sheiks, and other professional “servants of Allah” in mediating the devotees’ relations with God.

Yet its rejection of North Caucasian customs, particularly with regard to weddings and funerals, tended to polarize its opponents, and was, in many respects, a further obstacle to its spread. The rigid Wahhibite puritanism and fully veiled Wahhabi women were both alien and offensive to that freewheeling, hard-drinking, rough-shod egalitarianism with which traditional North Caucasian Islamic authorities had long since learned to compromise. Yet Wahhabis nevertheless forced such issues through their inevitable zeal and spiritual resolve.

Secondly, in a negative sense, the growth of Wahhabism may also be viewed as a product of Western influences for it is a potent reaction against the excesses of modernization. Evidently, it springs from a deep disillusionment with the prospects for economic transition, and feeds on widespread despair over the myriad forms of moral and political decay that are rapidly overwhelming Caucasian society. The roots of this movement, in short, may be traced to ever-deepening poverty, the prevalence of political corruption, and general frustration with processes of transition and modernization.

Whatever its virtues, Sufist introspection offered no immediate answers for the critical social problems resulting from the current period of transition. And if the *tariqat* therefore seemed irrelevant to some impoverished mountaineers, there were other reasons why Dagestan's traditional Islamic order appeared to be pernicious. These involve the traditional cooperation between Dagestan's religious and political establishments: Disillusionment with the former increased with the corruption of the latter. Wahhabite rejection of political authority lent them an opportunity to free themselves from the bureaucratic constraints and political corruption of state

officials. The Wahhabite critique of moral degradation, social irresponsibility and the corruption of the religious and political establishment consequently found an eager audience among the least fortunate mountain villagers. Wahhabism lent dignity to the harsh austerity of their lives and provided spiritual sanction for their desperate hatred of the region's wealthy new leaders.

Thirdly, Wahhabism spread, through relatively prosperous villages,³ which found in its puritanism an organizational power for the preservation of their civic conventions and traditional morality against degenerative influences of the media, mass culture, individualism and liberalism. Wahhabite rejection of political authority lent them an opportunity to free themselves from the bureaucratic constraints and political corruption of state officials.

Fourthly, growing travel opportunities increased foreign influence and contributed to the spread of Wahhabite fundamentalism. As travel restrictions were eased, more North Caucasians made the pilgrimage to Mecca. More than half of those who have embarked on the *haj* from the Russian Federation since independence are from Dagestan. Moreover, as religious youths increasingly were educated internationally in some of the best foreign Islamic universities they lost respect for the traditional North Caucasian clergy, who tend to be elderly and, in some cases, half-educated. Other international students attended madrassas that taught radical Islam.

A series of semi-annual monitoring surveys conducted by Kisriev⁴ found that, by March 1999, three percent of Dagestan's 2.1 million people identified themselves as Wahhabis. Most of these were living in the west-central mountains and foothills of the republic in territories traditionally inhabited by Avars, Dargins, and Dagestan's indigenous Chechen-Akhins. Yet the political

significance of the Wahhabites was greater than their numbers would suggest. Most Wahhabis lived in relatively small groups scattered through rural villages. Religious schisms often occurred within a family, pitting children against parents and brothers against brothers. Wahhabi fundamentalists challenged traditional Muslims, polarizing village life and provoking a rural arms race. When a few villagers espoused Wahhabism the entire village began arming itself.

The Wahhabite critique of traditional clergy not only increased mutual enmity, but also had a radicalizing effect upon the otherwise mild traditionalists. For example, in 1997, the Spiritual Directorate of the Muslims of Dagestan (which Dagestanis call “DUMD”) cited the Islamic prohibition against the realistic depiction of people in order unexpectedly to demand (by unanimous vote) an end to a project to erect a monument of Imam Shamil on the two hundredth anniversary of his birth. Caught off guard, the Dagestani government canceled its decision to construct the monument to the leader of the emancipation movement of the Caucasian mountaineers.

Following an influx of Wahhabi missionaries backed by extensive funding from Persian Gulf organizations, Dagestan’s Wahhabis built their own mosques and controlled 14 Islamic schools. For awhile they distributed religious literature from their own publishing house, and operated a satellite uplink in Kizilyurt through which they communicated with one another, and with their supporters abroad. Indeed, as early as 1998 Dagestani authorities accused Islamic fundamentalist groups in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia of launching a *jihad* in Dagestan.

From August 1996 to September 1999 there were numerous violent conflicts in Dagestani villages between traditionalist Muslims and “Wahhabis”. In the most notorious instance, an ethnic Dargin *djamaat*⁵ in Dagestan’s central foothills, consisting of the villages of Karamakhi, Chabanmakhi, and Kadar, sustained an armed resistance against Dagestani authority.

Wahhabism made headlines in connection with the military operations in of 1999. On August 2, and again on September 5, Dagestan was invaded by Chechnya based insurgents, a portion of whom were Dagestani “Wahhabis”.

During the war, the People’s Assembly bowed to pressure from the DUMD and urgently prepared legislation prohibiting Wahhabism in Dagestan. It gained considerable momentum in this regard from an Avar, named Surakat Asiyatilov. Asiyatilov is, at once, leader of the Islamic Party in Dagestan and head of the Assembly Committee on Civil and Religious Organizations and Affairs. He is strongly committed to the DUMD. On 16 September, the day the war ended, and after only one reading, the fourth session of the People’s Assembly unanimously passed the law “On the Prohibition of Wahhabite and Other Extremist Activity on the Territory of the Republic of Dagestan.” The law specifically outlaws Wahhabism. Yet it does not specify state how, and by whom, it will be determined what does, and what does not, count as Wahhabism. The law does, however, designate the DUMD as the dominant Islamic spiritual organization in Dagestan. In effect, the law transforms the DUMD into a state organ for the regulation of religious affairs for Dagestan’s Sunni Muslims.

III. Research Questions, Method, and Data

The preceding discussion of the causes and consequences of Wahhabism in Dagestan is based upon the fieldwork and firsthand observations by two of the authors of events in Dagestan over a period of several years.⁶ It reflects the series of monitoring surveys that were previously mentioned, and that included questions on religious views; it reflects a series of publications on this topic,⁷ and it suggests certain hypotheses. The present study enables us to test these hypotheses by means of a more elaborate survey instrument, a larger survey sample, and a more extensive quantitative analysis than was available in the course of the monitoring surveys. The hypotheses are:

- H1 *Most Dagestanis regard Wahhabism as an extremist movement.*
- H2 *Economic despair is a cause of Wahhabism.* Wahhabis often have appeared in villages where unemployment is high and opportunities for economic advancement are few. Anecdotal evidence suggests that Wahhabism is a puritanical, spiritualist reaction against new economic disparities that ostentaciously and unevenly bestow the benefits of modernization.
- H3 These disparities are attributable partly to political corruption. In its rejection of political authority, Wahhabism offers an response to self-serving elites. *Political alienation is a cause of Wahhabism.*
- H4 Western influences are evident in Dagestan's transition to a market economy, a democratic political system, and a modern liberal culture. Those who suffer in the course of these transitions, or who regret the passage of traditional structures, may seek alternatives to Western influences. *Supporters of Wahhabism are opposed to Western influences.*

- H5 Many observations of Wahhabi activities, and many clashes between Wahhabis and Islamic traditionalists have occurred in villages of Avars, Dargins, and Dagestan's Chechen-Akhins, suggesting that *Avars, Chechen-Akhins, and Dargins are most likely to support Wahhabism*. Two of the authors have argued ⁸ that the spread of Wahhabism in Dagestan occurs along a cleavage distinguishing those ethnic groups that tend to be oriented more toward Eastern values and those that tend more toward Western values, including socialism. Avars, Chechen-Akhins, and Dargins tend toward the former.
- H6 On the other hand, Lezgins, and ethnic Russians tend to orient toward Western values. Russians are not Muslims, and Lezgins, who are Islamic and reside in Dagestan's southernmost tip, were exposed to cosmopolitanism through their contact with the oil industry in Baku at the turn of the twentieth century. Additionally, Lezgin culture, which stresses education, promotes professional, technical, and specialized careers that often bring their practitioners into contact with western culture. These considerations suggest that *Lezgins, and Russians are least likely to support Wahhabism*.

In the spring of 1999, the authors received funding to investigate these and other issues. ⁹ We planned a study of Dagestani citizens and elites that would provide an opportunity to check our hypotheses. Unfortunately, warfare on Dagestan's western frontier in August 1999 made it necessary to postpone the start of the survey until 30 March 2000, after which it was conducted throughout Dagestan continuously until 13 April.

The central part of this study, a formalized closed survey of 1001 respondents from across the Republic, involved the administration of a twenty-seven-question instrument. In accord with

authoritative demographic data available in *Natsional'nosti Dagestana*,¹⁰ the sample was stratified, in the first phase of selection, with respect to ethnic groups, urbanites and villagers. Villagers were further stratified among categories of lowlands, foothills, and highlands. In the second phase of selection, individual respondents were selected from voter registration lists in the sites that were chosen in the first phase.¹¹

In order to provide a qualitative supplement to the quantitative survey data, as the second part of our study 40 open-ended interviews were conducted from 3 April to 22 May 2000 with members of Dagestan's professional, scientific, and creative intelligentsia. Since sample selection was necessarily based upon accessibility and cooperation on the part of the prospective respondents, the interview results are more suggestive than conclusive. The interviews were conducted according to a prepared list of 28 questions, and were recorded on tape with permission or otherwise stenographed. Both the survey and the interviews referred to "Wahhabis" and "Wahhabism" without attempt to specify these terms beyond common Dagestani usage. Indeed, we sought to learn what the terms meant to Dagestanis.

Of course, empirical research is difficult in a country like Dagestan. Western survey methodologies are challenged by the extremity of the given cultural and infrastructural obstacles. Telephone interviewing is impossible as many Dagestanis and most villagers lack telephones, travelling for face-to-face interviews is difficult and often dangerous. Any tradition of interrogation on political issues for sole scientific purposes is lacking, and due to recent violence, people are sometimes afraid to speak out on issues as charged as Wahhabism. Therefore, political inquiry in Dagestan invariably encounters reticence on the part of some respondents to speak openly on issues of controversy. In addition, local cultures must be given consideration if

responses are to be elicited at all. This sometimes raises conceptual and contextual, as well as linguistic, issues.

Discouraging as these difficulties may be, it proved possible to surmount them to a great extent. However, the price was a rather inelaborate set of variables for which survey and interview data could be obtained. The results, in any case, are the best available data on Dagestani attitudes toward religious issues, and the exception to other reports, which are both rare and anecdotal in their nature.¹² Indeed, much of the available literature on Dagestan has been contributed by two of the authors, and is outlined in the notes.

IV. Wahhabism from a Dagestani Perspective

How do Dagestani citizens see Wahhabism? In the population survey, respondents were asked to agree (1) or disagree (2) with each of the following three statements: a) ‘Wahhabis are Muslims, and they should not be considered extremists’, b) ‘There are Wahhabis who are just simple believers, and other Wahhabis who are religious extremists’, and c) ‘Wahhabis are extremists that hide behind a religious facade.’ The results, displayed in table 1, show that more than three quarters of Dagestanis share their government’s assessment that Wahhabis are extremists behind a religious facade. In accord with H1, less than a tenth think they are simply a brand of Muslims, but not extremists. However, it is remarkable that there are so many missing values, each corresponding to an individual who declined to answer the question. From this it may be safely inferred that there is remarkable reticence to disclose opinions on Wahhabism – suggesting that Wahhabism remains a controversial and dangerous topic in Dagestan.

Table 1: Citizens' Perception of Wahhabism

Percentages of 'agree' (based on whole sample)	(n)	Wahhabis are Muslims, not extremists		Some Wahhabis are just believers, others are religious extremists		Wahhabis are extremists behind a religious facade	
		valid	overall	valid	overall	Valid	overall
Overall missing cases	(1001)	11.4	9.1 20.5	39.3	30.1 23.6	87.1	77.0 11.7
Avars missing cases	(279)	12.4	10.4 16.5	48.6	36.9 24.0	80.4	69.2 14.0
Dargins missing cases	(172)	23.0	16.3 29.1	57.5	42.4 26.2	89.7	75.6 15.7
Kumyks missing cases	(134)	5.8	4.5 23.1	34.0	26.9 20.9	94.6	78.4 17.2
Lezgins missing cases	(130)	7.8	6.9 11.5	15.6	13.1 16.2	91.2	87.7 3.8
Laks missing cases	(50)	12.8	10.0 22.0	54.1	40.0 26.0	93.0	80.0 14.0
Russians/Cossacks missing cases	(71)	2.3	2.8 23.9	35.7	21.1 40.8	98.4	85.9 12.7
Chechens missing cases	(53)	14.9	13.2 11.3	31.3	28.3 9.4	54.9	52.8 3.8
Azeris missing cases	(39)	-	- 38.5	18.2	10.3 43.6	94.6	89.7 5.1
Tabasarans missing cases	(27)	4.3	3.7 14.8	8.7	7.4 14.8	100	96.3 3.7
Men missing cases	(486)	10.3	8.2 20.2	40.9	31.9 22.0	83.1	72.0 13.4
Women missing cases	(515)	12.5	9.9 20.8	37.8	28.3 25.0	90.9	81.7 10.1
Village missing cases	(496)	13.4	11.3 15.5	40.0	33.3 16.9	84.1	75.8 9.9
Town missing cases	(503)	9.3	7.0 25.4	38.5	26.8 30.2	90.3	78.1 13.5

Consistent with H6, Wahhabis are seen as extremists especially by Tabasarans, Azeris, Russians and Lezgins. Tabasarans are ethnic cousins to the Lezgins, though we had not anticipated that they would align with Lezgins on this issue. Azeris may be suspicious of Wahhabis because they (along with a group of 5,000 Lezgins) are Dagestan's only Shiite Muslims. Since Wahhabis are Sunni Muslims, Azeris are a minority within the Islamic community who might therefore

prefer a secular government. On the other hand, Chechens, and to a much lesser degree Avars and Dargins, tend to disagree that Wahhabis are extremists. In accord with H5, these groups are above average in their assessment that Wahhabis are not extremists, but Muslims. Thus whatever else it may signify, the term “Wahhabism” denotes a genuine religious cleavage in Dagestani society which has significant ethnic ramifications, sometimes divides urban and rural residents, and, therefore, represents a significant threat to Dagestan’s stability.¹³

But exactly who views Wahhabis as extremists? To get an answer, we did a logistic regression analysis with the perception of Wahhabis as extremists being the dependent variable.¹⁴ For this purpose, answers of persons calling Wahhabis extremists were coded one, and some of their characteristics were compared with those of all other respondents whose answers on the Wahhabism issue were coded zero. Results of a logistic regression analysis show how many times more or less probable (‘odds ratio’) it is for the dependent variable to occur if one specific characteristic is given. Table 2 summarizes such results. They make clear that the relation of Dagestan with Russia is the central determining factor in the evaluation of Wahhabism. Compared with Dagestanis who long for a more independent Dagestan, those Dagestanis who want Dagestan to have closer relations with Russia are 2.7 times more likely to see Wahhabis as extremists. By the same token, those Dagestanis who desire to maintain the status quo are 2.6 times more likely to see Wahhabis as extremists than their fellow citizens who wish for a more independent Dagestan. In addition, those who are less inclined to see Russia as a threat to Dagestan, are 1.7 times as likely to see Wahhabis as extremists, than do those who see Russia as a very serious threat to Dagestan. Dagestanis who do not see Russia as a serious threat at all, are 2.6 times as likely to see Wahhabis as extremists, than do those who see Russia as a very serious threat. On balance, anti-Wahhabism, is positively correlated with pro-Russia attitude. By the

same token, Wahhabism is positively correlated anti-Russia-involvement. This is particularly significant since other survey data show that a) Dagestanis strongly identify with Russia; 63.6% chose Russia as one of the two most important referents of their identification; b) in case of an acute crisis more Dagestanis would trust “Russian Federal leadership” than any alternative, including “Dagestan’s leadership” and private networks of relatives and friends (respectively 63.7%, 42.5%, and 42.6%); and c) most Dagestanis (62.8%) want a closer relationship with Russia, as opposed to those who want more independence for Dagestan (14.8%). Thus, since support for Wahhabism correlates with negative attitudes toward Russia, and since attitudes toward Russia are consistently positive, it is not surprising that attitudes toward Wahhabism are overwhelmingly negative.¹⁵

The data provide strong support for H4. In table 2, the value of 0.4 for this variable indicates that those Dagestanis who do *not* consider Western influence as a serious threat to Dagestan are 40 percent more likely to see Wahhabis as a threat to Dagestan as those Dagestanis who actually do consider western countries to be a serious threat. This result is consistent with data in table 1 that support H5 and H6, since the latter two hypotheses are essentially subsidiary to H4. With H4 we supposed that Wahhabism is, in part, a reaction against the influence of Western values and practices in Dagestani economic, political, and cultural life. Based upon preliminary fieldwork and event data we then identified the three ethnic groups that were least inclined toward Western influences (H5) and the two that were most inclined toward Western influence (H6). The data in table one are consistent with H5 and H6, and the data in table 2 provide weak support for H4.

In addition to those who more sympathetic toward Western values, table 2 indicates that town dwellers, women, and elder persons are more inclined to see Wahhabis as extremists. Islam plays a greater role in the life of many villages than in city life, and therefore should lend an atmosphere more conducive to the development of Wahhabism. Villagers also tend to be poorer, and more isolated from economic and cultural benefits that may derive from modernization. Since they are more likely to perceive the costs of transition than its benefits, and since some transitions are broadly associated with Western influences, villagers may be more concerned about Western influences. On the other hand, city life encourages toleration and cosmopolitanism, both of which are incompatible with rigid Wahhabi views. Islam has a wider appeal to Dagestani men than to women, perhaps because like other public religions it appeals to public inclinations that are often associated with men.¹⁶ Traditionally, Dagestani women take a more moderate, less confrontational, approach to social and religious issues, whereas Wahhabism has sometimes been a focus for confrontational and extremist appeals. Moreover, the puritanical strictures of Wahhabism would place limits upon the social and political roles, as well as the attire, of women who currently enjoy gender equality comparable to that in the West in Dagestan's larger towns. Older people, who are more likely to favor traditional North Caucasian Islamic practices, tend to be suspicious of recent spiritual imports. Generally, these results appear to support anecdotal reports that many Wahhabis are young men from rural backgrounds.

Table 2: Logistic regression for "Wahhabis are extremists behind a religious facade"

	Odd ratio	Significance
Relationship of Dagestan and Russia: (reference c.= more independent Dagestan) closer to Russia	2.692 ⁾	0.000
Status quo	2.565	0.004
Gender (reference c.= male)	1.848	0.004

Threat for Dagestan: Russia (reference c.= very serious) not so serious	1.716	0.098
not serious at all	2.651	0.002
Place of residence (reference c.= village)	1.057	0.794
Age (in years)	1.015	0.019
Educational attainment (reference c.= incomplete high school) high school, prof., techni.	0.996	0.989
Higher education, university student	0.651	0.152
Threat for Dagestan: Western Countries (reference c.= very serious) not so serious	0.400	0.000
not serious at all	0.128	0.000
Trust in religious leaders (reference c.= not mentioned)	0.355	0.003
Cox and Snell R –Quadrate	0.431	n=721

⁾ Read: Those who want Dagestan to have closer relations with Russia, are 2.7 times as probable to see Wahhabis as extremists than those who desire a more independent Dagestan.

Table 2 also underscores the need for further research. For example, the table, like much of our preliminary research, raises questions concerning the relationship between education and Wahhabite proclivities. It appears that Wahhabism may be attractive to people, particularly young educated men, who are frustrated by a lack of economic opportunities, or whose education invites a critical attitude toward political realities. In Dagestan especially, significant numbers of influential young men are educated at universities elsewhere in the Islamic world where they are exposed to radical doctrines. However, the present data is inconclusive with respect to these important questions.

V. How Do Dagestani Elites View Wahhabism?

To explore Dagestani views of Wahhabism in greater depth, we asked members of the Dagestani professional, scientific, and creative intelligentsia about the factors that had contributed to the appearance and proliferation of Wahhabism in Dagestan. Elite opinions frequently echoed survey results, as for example, in the case of a Chechen-Akhin employed as a high level city administrator in Mahachkala:

So far, Wahhabism is only a cover-up. Those whom we call Wahhabis don't call themselves by this name. This name just covers up their real essence — banditry. They are anarchists, nihilists deep down. They are renegades who wish to realize their secret desires. Since they want to make it sound honorable they come forward with religious slogans. In the present situation it was a suitable slogan. If the situation changes they'll choose a new slogan. In the twentieth century it was the slogan of the class struggle, expropriation of the expropriators. Both then and now active people were of the same kind: destroyers. I doubt that among the so-called Wahhabis there is even one person who would be able to conduct a three or four hour discussion on religion. They don't know half of what an ordinary Mullah should know!"

In addition, opinions regarding these factors could be classified into eight categories.¹⁷ Among these, three factors stand out as being most significant:

- Fifteen respondents mentioned economic problems, including a low standard of living, unemployment, and poverty. Typical were statements similar to those of 62 year old Avar employed as a physician in a municipal hospital: “Wahhabism, like any form of extremism, is based upon poverty and haplessness. The situation in Dagestan is staggering, so many unemployed.” These views support H2.
- Fourteen respondents mentioned alienation resulting from political problems, including weakness, deceitfulness, corruption, and indifference to the lives of ordinary people on the part of leaders in Moscow and Mahachkala. Often they couched their assessments in terms like those of an Avar employed at the Dagestan Scientific Center: “ The reason for the emergence of Wahhabism is the anti-ethnic politics of Russia; corruption, and deceit of top government officials, including those in Dagestan. And also the aspiration of people to improve their lives.” These views lend support to H3.
- Fourteen respondents mentioned various external factors, such as missionaries from Muslim and Western countries, their ideological pressure, and their finances. These references often resembled the those of a Lak businessman: “ Wahhabis appeared because of the money from abroad and the competition in the market of religious ‘service’. One side called the other side ‘Wahhabis’. Additionally, it is important that many people don’t like the invasion of Western capitalism with its cult of money.” These responses are significant particularly in light of current controversy regarding the role of outside Islamist influence and funding in the spread of political Islam in the Northeast Caucasus. Many interviews suggested that external factors were important. Moreover, H4 is consistent with those respondents who cited religious and ideological pressures from the West as contributing to an extreme Islamist backlash. For example, protestant missionaries from the West have had modest success in

some of Dagestan's cities, while attracting local attention, and raising concern about converts drawn from Islamic faithful.

While these categories were most significant in terms of the number of responses, the reasons disclosed in the other five additional categories are no less revealing:

- Seven respondents mentioned ideological factors occurring in the spiritual vacuum that emerged after the collapse of communism; the influx of Western ideology alien to Dagestani society; ignorance of the masses; and spiritual search of the youth. Such persons often argued along the lines of a Lezgin government employee: "If Islam corresponded with its role and fulfilled its functions and tasks, there wouldn't be any Wahhabism. It just proves that religion is weak and unable to fulfill its function of educating people regarding peace and love toward their neighbors." These responses are at least consistent with H4, and some might be taken as providing H4 with tentative support.
- Four respondents mentioned a traditionally high level of Islamization among Dagestanis; their tradition of religious activity; and the historical role of Islam in Dagestan.
- Four respondents mentioned an attraction of Wahhabism as an ideology of a clear and simplified Islam. One of the more complex arguments, which also includes reference to outside Islamist influences, was offered by a Kumyk who serves as the head of an educational institution:

Wahhabis are unhappy with the old religious leaders. Don't forget that the leaders from our past communist times are not the best people of this land. ... The

best people got educated and ... moved to live in many parts of the Soviet Union. ... They secretly believed in God, but didn't stay in their high mountain villages yearning for education. But those who served Allah officially were the ones who stayed in the mountains, wretched and embittered. They earned their bread by funeral services..... The religious renaissance began during (the period of) Gorbachev. The demand for religious people increased. In some villages the former leaders of the Communist Party started new careers in the Islamic business. ... All authority had collapsed in the villages, so the religious way of solving local problems came to the forefront. Religion replaced the Communist Party. The people who could read the Koran in Arabic were advancing and competing among themselves. It wasn't easy for them to be overt social activists. ... Generally, they are deeply religious. They became firm in their faith in times when it wasn't encouraged and held no career prospects. Some of them are fanatics. Old fashioned religious leaders didn't compromise their faith even if their new, wealthy sponsors from the Arab countries demanded it from them. They didn't refuse financial help and personal prosperity that came with it, and they were able to do so many things with money. But only on the condition that Islam would stay intact in the way they preserved it through generations in the hard conditions of the underground. But there are always people that are ready for reforms. The foreign Muslims certainly don't like the arrogance of our veteran-Muslims, and their conviction that Islam is pure only here in Dagestan. They don't want to accept Dagestan as the center of orthodox Islam. Wahhabism is the new stream in Dagestani Islam that resists our traditional 'catacomb' Islam.

Many young people study abroad in Islamic universities. They are different Muslims already, not like our keepers of the ancient traditional Islam.

- Four respondents mentioned competition among religious activists leading to ideological divisions among them. The following, from a Lak journalist, is a representative statement, which also, once again, evokes themes of external funding, and of simplicity:

The problem of Wahhabism was artificially created by those pseudo-Islamists that go on the *haj* with money from fraud and have nothing to do with true Islam.

True Islam doesn't divide religion into Wahhabism and pure Islam, etc. These people are far from Islam and just use it when drunks, thieves, and criminals started pretending to be saints, to go to the holy sites, do the *haj*. They don't need the true Islam; they look for its simplified form. Pure Islam didn't satisfy them. They promoted their own version of Islam, especially because it was generously paid for.

- Finally, two respondents mentioned the Chechen factor, that is, the influence of politico-ideological processes in the neighboring republic.

According to Dagestani elites, therefore, Wahhabism seems to be a problem stemming from a large variety of causes. The process of economic and political transitions has shaken the foundations of Dagestani society¹⁸ and, by the same token, provoked a wide range of societal pathologies. As a reaction to it, a new interest in religion has arisen, filling the gaps of spiritual

and ideological identification created by the demise of communism. The old, ill-educated and traditional Islamic leadership was not sufficiently able to meet these challenges, such that there was room for a new course of Islamic revival. It came with funding from the Persian Gulf and is by no means restricted to religious concerns, but serves as a misleading label for political and criminal purposes as well. For Dagestan, Wahhabism is a problem with both domestic and foreign roots. Its economic and political features suggested the need for a government response.

The Dagestani government responded by banning Wahhabism through legislative action of Dagestan's People's Assembly on 16 September 1999. Fifteen interviewees saw benefits from this legislation, whereas 16 respondents thought that the law would not help. Some respondents believed that Wahhabism was poorly defined by the law and therefore had no clear target. A young Lak technical specialist expected that, "This law will help to eliminate the word [Wahhabism] from use. But new words will emerge to define religious opposition." The Kumyk educator thought that the law would have even less effect:

The anti-Wahhabi law doesn't work and cannot work. It is anti-constitutional, and the court cannot sentence anybody simply because he/she is a Wahhabite. If he is armed or breaks the criminal law, then the Wahhabi would be prosecuted on a certain basis in criminal law and not under our anti-Wahhabi law".

In addition, some expressed a general lack of confidence in Dagestani legislation and enforcement. A Kumyk arts employee confided: "None of our laws really work. Or they don't use them. They're written just to declare a wishful condition of life." Even proponents were

sceptical in this respect. According to an Avar agronomist, “ The law could help if it is used properly, instead of how it usually happens: they arrest someone for Wahhabite propaganda; keep him for a month and then let him go. Same with militants. As a result, they [Wahhabis and militants] act aggressively and with impunity.” A Lezgin economics professor summarized several common themes:

It is very important that all the [Dagestani] people really want to get rid of this evil. I think there are still many people that sympathize with Wahhabis. So on the one hand its dissemination should be stopped, for which we need the law. And, on the other hand, we need to have well-planned ideological work, especially with young people who’s searching leads them to be more interested in foreigners than in their own tradition.

VI. Conclusion: Is Wahhabism a Threat for Dagestan’s Stability?

To varying degrees, survey and interview data support, and in some cases augment, our hypotheses. H1 is supported by more than three quarters of survey respondents who view Wahhabis as extremists. However, the unusually high number of missing values raises the possibility that some who declined specifically to answer questions about Wahhabis may have done so because they feared that a sympathetic view of a banned and broadly unpopular religious movement might have led to unwanted repercussions. This might be the case particularly since Wahhabite issues have a controversial and violent history, and since there is no tradition of survey research in Dagestan. If it were indeed the case that some Wahhabite sympathizers feared

to respond, then the number of missing values might be taken as an indication that support for Wahhabism could be higher than indicated by survey results. Short of further research, however, this must remain a point of speculation, and even if most of the missing values turned out to be Wahhabite sympathizers, this would not substantially alter the finding that Wahhabis are viewed by the overwhelming majority of Dagestanis as extremists hiding behind a religious facade.

Interviews also supported H1, along with H2 and H3. More than any other variable, interviewees identified economic problems as a factor contributing to the spread of Wahhabism. A range of factors contributing to political alienation were mentioned almost as often. Yet, once again, interview results are intended to be suggestive rather than conclusive.

H2 might also be regarded as receiving indirect support from the finding among survey respondents that villagers are less likely than urbanites to regard Wahhabis as extremists. There is a strong tendency for Dagestani villagers to be poorer than the inhabitants of the larger towns and cities, and villagers certainly have fewer economic opportunities than their urban cousins. Indeed, most villagers have been reduced to the barest subsistence farming. Yet in this regard other factors are also significant, such as the greater strength of Islam in the villages, and the spirit of toleration in the cities. Overall, results support but do not confirm H2.

Concerning political alienation, H3 receives further support from our the unanticipated correlation between attitudes toward Wahhabism and attitudes toward Russia: Compared with Dagestanis who long for a more independent Dagestan, those Dagestanis who want Dagestan to

have closer relations with Russia are 2.7 times more likely to see Wahhabis as extremists. Dagestanis who do not see Russia as a serious threat, are 2.6 times as likely to see Wahhabis as extremists, than do those who see Russia as a very serious threat. Thus those who see Wahhabis as a threat are not alienated from the Russian Federation. However, this analysis does not pertain to attitudes regarding the Dagestani government, which was the focus of several interviews that connected Wahhabism with political discontent.

H4 receives support from both the survey and the interviews. At several points in the study, there are indications that those who see Western countries as a serious threat are less likely to see Wahhabism as a threat. H4 receives further indirect support from survey results confirming H4 and H5, since these predict the relative strength or weakness of support for Wahhabism among ethnic groups that vary in their alignment on Western values.

Survey results show that Azeris and Tabasarans are also less likely to sympathize with Wahhabis. Though the latter results were not anticipated, they are readily explained.

Survey results also show that Wahhabism appeals more to men than women, more to rural than urban residents, and more to the young than to the old, thereby supporting anecdotal observations that Wahhabism holds particular appeal to young men from the villages.

Wahhabism poses no immediate threat to Dagestan's stability because Wahhabism is rejected by an overwhelming majority of Dagestanis, and because it is identified by elites in terms of a

variety of social pathologies rather than in terms of an authentic spiritual or ideological alternative. Moreover, because Wahhabism is correlated with respondents' attitudes toward Russia, its proliferation will be limited so long as Dagestanis retain their consistently positive attitudes toward the Federation.

Nevertheless, there are several reasons for concern over the longer term. First, support for Wahhabism clearly cuts along, and potentially reinforces, ethnic cleavages. Thus, on the one hand, support for Wahhabism might contribute to future ethnic tensions, while, other hand, the latter might also augment the former. However, other survey data showed that the salience of ethnic differences tend to be overestimated by Dagestanis themselves, and that Dagestanis identify themselves most strongly, not in terms of their ethnicity, but in terms of their allegiance to Dagestan and to Russia, in that order.¹⁹

Second, the study finds weak support for hypotheses that Wahhabism feeds upon dissatisfaction with economic and political circumstances, as well as upon cultural concerns about Western influences. Yet, all of these are long term problems that will prove difficult to resolve. Since the survey was conducted budgetary transfers from Moscow to Mahachkala have substantially increased. Moscow has also provided significant infrastructural improvements in Dagestan, and prepared for the republic to play a greater role in hydrocarbon transfers, while at the same time reopening Soviet-era defense industries that were based in based in several Dagestani towns and villages. Yet signs of economic growth remain marginal and are largely confined to population centers, whereas Wahhabism proves most appealing in the countryside. While economic

investment and growth are likely to limit Wahhabism these may prove difficult to cultivate in those sites where they are most needed.

There is no reason to suppose that problems such as political corruption and alienation will decline in the short term. For example, in the winter of 1998-9, officials in Moscow acted to eliminate some of Dagestan's corrupt officials while leaving others in place and achieving no net change in the tenor of Dagestani politics. If there are not consistent political improvements then mounting frustration and cynicism may add the appeal of Wahhabism.

Nevertheless, there is hope that Dagestan's economic and political transitions will lead to better days. This cannot be said of Dagestan's cultural transition. Western influences are only likely to increase, and it seems that these inevitably will inspire a partially negative reaction for years to come

Overall, the influence of Wahhabism upon Dagestan's stability is likely to remain minimal so long as Dagestanis perceive tangible economic and political improvements, and so long as they continue to view Russia favorably. Therefore the most optimistic scenario would involve continued action on the part of the Russian Federation to remove corrupt Dagestani officials and promote economic development, particularly in the countryside. Yet while Kremlin officials appear to have grasped the significance of strategic economic investment they are most likely to promote political reforms in a selective manner that favors their own interests.

¹ Ware and Kisriev, "Political Stability in Dagestan: Ethnic Parity and Religious Polarization", *Problems of Post-Communism*, 47, 2, March/April 2000; Ware and Kisriev, "The Islamic Factor in Dagestan", *Central Asian Survey*, 19, 2, June 2000; Kisriev and Ware, "Conflict and Catharsis: A Report on Developments in Dagestan following the Incursion of August and September 1999", *Nationalities Papers*, 28, 3, September 2000; Ware and Kisriev, "Ethnic Parity and Democratic Pluralism in Dagestan: a Consociational Approach". *Europe-Asia Studies*, January 2001, 53, 1; Ware and Kisriev, "Russian Recentralization Arrives in the Republic of Dagestan: Implications for Institutional Integrity and Political Stability", *Eastern European Constitutional Review*, 10, 1, Winter 2001; Kisriev and Ware, "Democracy and Security in Dagestan", presented at the Association for the Study of Nationalities World Conference, New York, 6 April 2001; Kisriev and Ware, "A Summer of Innuendo: Growing Competition among Dagestan's Political Elite," *Central Asian Survey*, 20, 2, June 2000; Kisriev and Ware, "The Selection of Dagestan's Second People's Assembly", *Electoral Studies* 20, 3; Kisriev and Ware, "Irony and Political Islam", *Nationalities Papers* (under consideration).

² Sufi religious orders consisting of a group of murids, or disciples, under the leadership of a spiritual teacher known as a sheikh.

³ Such as the Dargin villages of Karamakhi, Chabanmakhi, and Kadar in Dagestan's central foothills.

⁴ The monitoring surveys were conducted under the auspices of the Dagestan Bureau of Statistics and with partial funding from Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

⁵ A djamaat is a village or historically connected group of villages, each of which embraces several clans, known as tuhums. The djamaats have been the traditional units of Dagestani political organization since around 1500, and were often democratic in nature. Even if they have relocated to an urban center, all Dagestanis know their djamaat, where they invariably have relatives and friends. Young Dagestanis, even in the cities, often come under substantial pressures to marry others from their djamaat.

⁶ See Ware and Kisriev, "The Islamic Factor in Dagestan", *Central Asian Survey*, 19, 2, June 2000; Kisriev and Ware, "Conflict and Catharsis: A Report on Developments in Dagestan following the Incursions of August and September 1999," *Nationalities Papers*, 28, 3, September 2000.

⁷ Ware and Kisriev, "Dagestan: Ethnic Parity and Religious Polarization", *Problems of Post-Communism*, 47, 2, March/April 2000; "The Islamic Factor in Dagestan", *Central Asian Survey*, 19, 2, June 2000; Kisriev and Ware, "Conflict and Catharsis: A Report on Developments in Dagestan following the Incursion of August and September 1999", *Nationalities Papers*, 28, 3, September 2000; "The Selection of Dagestan's Second People's Assembly", *Electoral Studies* 20, 3; Kisriev and Ware, "Irony and Political Islam", *Nationalities Papers* (under consideration).

⁸ Ware and Kisriev, "The Islamic Factor in Dagestan," *Central Asian Survey*, 19, 2, June 2000.

⁹ The authors are grateful for the support of the National Council for Eurasian and Eastern European Research and the National Research Council. Preliminary survey research was funded in 1998 by Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. For details on approach, methodology and results see "Democratization in Dagestan", paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, San Francisco, 1 September 2001.

¹⁰ Or *Ethnicities of Dagestan*, (Mahachkala: Statsbornik, 1996).

¹¹ The lists are compiled by electoral commissions and include all people 18 years and older who are who officially are registered as residing in each area. Random selection from these lists was accomplished according to a "step method". The size of the "step" was determined by dividing the total number of names on any given list by the number of respondents required from that area. As a consequence, the size of the "step" varied, but generally it was greater than 12. In a case, for example, where the "step" was 14, we contacted every 14th person on the list. In the event of the unavailability of, or refusal by, one of these selectees, the next person on the list was contacted. Randomizing features of this method generally yielded samples that were proportionate to demographic data with respect to age and gender. However, random sampling in many Dagestani villages, conducted at virtually any time, is likely to lead to over-representation of women, as many men go to cities for purposes of employment. Therefore it was necessary to compensate by sampling in urban areas that was further stratified with respect to gender, so as to balance the number of men in the survey in accord with demographic data. When interpreting the tabular data that follow it must be borne in mind that data for villages are disproportionately female, and data for towns are disproportionately male. While the overall response rate was 71 percent, some items from completed surveys contain missing values, which are not always randomly distributed.

¹² In the tables, data will be broken down for Dagestan's most important ethnic groups, since issues of ethnicity are central for every understanding of Dagestan and its cultural features. Because of extraordinarily many missing cases, valid numbers usually do not add up to the sample size of 1001; usual case numbers for the different ethnic groups are shown in table 1. Interpretations of survey data are based on comparisons of percentages and means, sometimes

on correlation coefficients. Since missing values are not distributed randomly, we tried to avoid missing-sensible multivariate statistics and calculated percentages regularly on the constant base of the overall sample.

¹³ Usually, those Dagestinis who see changes for the worse, both in Dagestan's economy (Spearman's Rho = -.12) and political life (Spearman's Rho = -.15), tend slightly to agree with the statement 'Wahhabis are extremists behind a religious facade'. This corresponds with the conviction expressed in many elite interviews that Wahhabism emerges from Dagestan's transitional problems. Exclusively among Chechens, possibly the least integrated of Dagestan's ethnic groups (See "Ethnicity and Identity in Dagestan" under consideration by *Nations and Nationalisms*), Wahhabis are regarded as extremists by those who see both Dagestan's economic situation (Spearman's Rho = .46) and social and cultural life (Spearman's Rho = -.53) changing to the better. This suggests that even among Dagestan's most alienated group, perceptions of opportunities for economic and cultural improvement undercuts the appeal of Wahhabism.

¹⁴ The dependent variable in a logistic regression is coded 0 and 1. A logistic regression defines the relation between dependent and independent variables in totally different way than a 'regular' regression, where one unit change in the independent variable is connected with a certain change in the dependent variable. Logistic regression uses 'odd ratios' instead, which show the probability for the value one (in the dependent variable) compared to a reference group. The significance column in table 2 indicates statistically significant differences, the standard limit being $p \leq 0.05$. The Cox and Snell R-Quadrate is an indicator for the amount of explained variance in the model, comparable to R-Square in the linear regression.

¹⁵ See Ware, Kisriev, Patzelt and Roericht, "Stability in the Caucasus: The Perspective from Dagestan", under consideration by *Problems of Post-Communism*.

¹⁶ See Ware, Kisriev, Patzelt, and Roericht, "Ethnicity and Identity in Dagestan", under consideration *Nations and Nationalisms*.

¹⁷ Since many individuals gave long lists of causal factors, items from several responses had to be attributed to more than one single category.

¹⁸ Cf. the following extract from an elite interview: "Earlier we had so-called socialist and capitalist regimes. They tried to maintain an economic, technical and military balance. Gorbachev, with his perestroika, practically ruined the country, and later Russia found itself on the edge of a crash. I agree that we needed democracy, but not at that speed. Western countries and NATO made all efforts to ruin the USSR and the Warsaw Pact, and later Russia. So they used the religious factor, including Wahhabism. Our country was economically and politically weakened, and it was a good ground for the dissemination of Wahhabism."

¹⁹ See Ware, Kisriev, Patzelt, and Roericht, "Ethnicity and Identity in Dagestan", under consideration *Nations and Nationalisms*.