

Following the news that Chechen Jihadist Doku Umarov has been killed, **Anthony Tucker-Jones** charts the rise and fall of Russia's most wanted terrorist

THE CHECHEN BIN LADEN

While all eyes have been on Russia's Winter Olympics and the gathering storm clouds over Ukraine, in the Russian North Caucasus it is business as usual. The violence that has blighted the tiny Russian republics of Kabardino-Balkaria, North Ossetia, Chechnya, Ingushetia and Dagestan over the last two decades bear striking similarities to Lebanon and Syria, and indeed the central Asian republics or "Stans" when the Soviet Union collapsed. In particular, since the 1990s there has been bad blood between many Chechens and the Russians following Moscow's two wars against the republic. Likewise, Ingush rebels have adopted the same militant Islamist ideology as their counterparts in Chechnya and Dagestan.

These long-running insurgencies have in recent months seeped into the Russian-Ukrainian confrontation. According to Russian media sources, in late 2013 Ingush opposition leader Magomed Khazbiev was involved in anti-Russian demonstrations in Ukraine. Similarly, Russia's security service, the FSB, claimed in February 2014 that four North Caucasus opposition figures were in Ukraine helping to orchestrate the campaign against Russian interests. Ingush rebels have also reportedly been in Syria fighting alongside the anti-Assad forces. Ingush suicide bomber, Magomed Yevloyev blew himself at Moscow's Domodedovo airport in 2011.

The Muslim inhabitants of these poverty-stricken republics on the very fringes of the Russian Federation want nothing to do with Moscow, and see the Russians and their secular allies as oppressors. The Russian republics of Dagestan, Chechnya and Ingushetia are the centre of a militant Islamist revolt that has resulted in a wave of assassinations, bombings and attacks on the Russian security forces, as the militants seek to carve out an Islamic Caliphate in the Caucasus.

It was perhaps inevitable that a guerrilla leader would emerge from the chaos to become one of Russia's most wanted rebels. Doku Umarov took charge in 2006 following the deaths of Shamil Basayev, Aslan Maskhadov and Khalim Saydullayev. Umarov declared he would instigate Sharia law across the Caucasus Emirate (Emarat Kavkaz) – chillingly this echoed al-Qaeda's desire for a return of the Middle Eastern Islamic caliphate. To achieve this he waged a systematic terror campaign against Russia's security forces and civilians alike. The Beslan siege, the Moscow metro bombings and the Moscow Domodedovo airport bombing are now bywords in the Islamists lexicon of atrocities.

In late March 2014 it was reported that the self-styled emir of the Caucasus Emirate had died. This was not the first time Doku Umarov, effectively the Osama bin Laden of the Caucasus, had been reported dead. But this information came from the Kavkaz Centre, the key website of Russia's Islamists. It claimed that Ali Abu-Mukhammad was now the new emir, as Umarov had become a "martyr". Perhaps understandably, the Russian authorities including Russia's counter-terrorism

Deadly journey: the attacks in Volgograd in December 2013 are thought to have been carried out under Umarov's orders



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organisation were reluctant to confirm this. It is not clear if he was killed by the security forces or died of natural causes. Earlier in January 2014 Ramzan Kadyrov, the Moscow-backed leader in Chechnya, claimed he had intelligence that Umarov had been killed. It has also been reported that Umarov may have been poisoned during a visit to a Chechen rebel base in the autumn of the previous year.

The Russian authorities' criminal "rap sheet" for Umarov is considerable and includes "crimes of gangsterism, attempted murder of a law enforcement officer, kidnapping, robbery, terrorism, murder and the illicit sale of arms, ammunition and explosives". Umarov is known to have had links with other militant groups operating in the region, including the Vilayat Dagestan, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (once close allies of al-Qaeda and the Taliban), the Islamic Jihad Group and the Chechen Martyrs Battalion. The IMU were scattered far and wide after being driven from their strongholds in Uzbekistan and Afghanistan; now they find common cause with the militants in the Caucasus.



Umarov, who does not hide his hatred of the Russians, declared, "The war will come to your street ... and you will feel it on your own skins." This was in reference to his orchestrated campaign of bombings and suicide attacks across Russia. Umarov equally hated Ramzan Kadyrov, who he viewed as little better than Moscow's puppet, installed to ensure Chechnya remained compliant to Russia's dictates.

If Umarov is indeed dead then President Putin's government will be relieved, as he has long been an elusive thorn in their side. In July 2013 Umarov's rhetoric caused Moscow to step up its already tight security measures after he urged fellow militants to target the Sochi Winter Olympics – which he dubbed the "satanic games". In light of the Games being staged only a few hundred miles from the violent Islamist insurgency, attack seemed almost inevitable. Some 40,000 Russian troops and police were poured into the area and Sochi was cut off from the outside world by the security cordon. Thankfully the games were spared bloodshed, but two bomb blasts in Volgograd claimed 30 lives. The Imarat Kavkaz warned of further attacks including Sochi itself, but they never materialised. In the face of all these ground forces, as well as anti-aircraft missiles and nearby naval vessels in the Black Sea, security experts assessed the militants were more likely to strike at softer targets.

Prior to Volgograd, Umarov took credit for the January 2011 Moscow airport bombing that killed 36 people and injured more than 100, as well as the March 2010 Moscow metro suicide bombings, which claimed the lives of another 39 as well as wounding 80. The attackers were two Muslim women from Dagestan. In a video message, Umarov said he had personally ordered the attacks to avenge the killings of Chechens by the Russian security forces near the town of Arshty. At the same time, a car bomb was detonated in the Dagestani town of Kizlyar outside the local interior ministry and the FSB security offices. In November 2009 his supporters blew up a train from Moscow to St Petersburg, leaving a death toll of 26. The Russian authorities despaired of Umarov's trail of destruction.

Born in the village of Kharshenoi in 1964, Umarov was an engineer by education. He went on to serve as Chechnya's Security Minister in the late 1990s, before Moscow put a stop to the republic's aspirations of independence. Taking to the hills, he commanded around a thousand guerrilla fighters on the "southwestern front". It was during this time that his hatred towards the Russians really hardened. Umarov was at war with Russia, a war that cost the lives of his two brothers Issa and Mussa and thousands of fellow Chechens.

He was said to have been responsible for the attack in neighbouring Ingushetia in 2004, during which the interior minister was killed. Likewise, he was accused of helping organise, along with Basayev, the Beslan school siege that same year. Of the Moscow Metro bombings he said they were "a legitimate act of revenge for the continued assassination of civilians in the Caucasus".

The Russian security forces attempted to neutralise Umarov on numerous occasions. According to intelligence

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sources, in 2010 Umarov may have been the victim of a counter-intelligence operation. Bizarrely he, or someone looking like him, appeared on YouTube to announce that he was stepping down and that Aslambek Vadalov was taking charge. Within days he issued a retraction saying that his resignation was not true – the impression was that Russian intelligence had possibly staged the video in an attempt to flush him out. This clearly failed as Umarov went on to organise the Domodedovo bombing.

Behind the scenes, however, Umarov's leadership did not go unchallenged. Vadalov, with the support of an Arab mujahid or holy warrior by the name of Muhannad, attempted to unseat Umarov and they may have also been behind his apparent resignation. But Umarov's followers appear to have rallied round; Muhannad was killed by Russian forces in April 2011 and Vadalov and his faction came back into the Emarat Kavkaz fold. The Insurgents' Supreme Islamic Court recognised Umarov as leader, while Amir Khmzat was appointed commander of the western sector and Hussein Gakayev took charge of the eastern sector.

It was then that the UN finally decided that Umarov was an individual of particular concern, after the UN Security Council's al-Qaeda and Taliban sanctions committee added him to the list of al-Qaeda and Taliban associates in early 2011. Umarov and his Emarat Kavkaz joined the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and the

Riyadus-Salikhin Reconnaissance and Sabotage Battalion of Chechen Martyrs.

The UN Security Council judged Umarov "was one of the main organisers of the raid on Ingushetia by militants on 22 June 2004, the sortie into Grozny on 21 August 2004, the hostage taking in Beslan of 1-3 September 2004 and the terrorist attacks in Moscow metro stations on 29 March 2010". The UN went on to add: "Doku Umarov is the leader of the Emarat Kavkaz. He has approximately 750 militants under his command as well as emissaries in foreign countries. In addition, he has overall command of groups operating in the North Caucasus, organises major terrorist acts and coordinates the provision of resources to militants". As a result, Interpol issued a special notice – the Chechen Bin Laden became an internationally wanted man.

On the whole the West has taken little notice of events in the Russian Caucasus, other than to revel in the unending security headache it has caused President Putin. That changed after the Boston marathon bombing in April 2013 which killed three people and wounded another 280. The two culprits were Chechen immigrants with links to Dagestan and the rebel Armed Forces of the Dagestani Front of the Caucasus Emirate. The North Caucasus insurgency had abruptly come to North America. Even with Umarov dead it is unlikely the Russian and US intelligence services can rest easy.

Russia's most wanted: Doku Umarov may have been poisoned in late 2013

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