

Caliphate for an Hour

By [Richard Lurie](#)

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Columnists should make predictions about the future. The fall of the Soviet Union and 9/11 caught us by surprise because of failures of imagination. But besides publicly exercising imagination, columnists should also examine their own failed predictions in hopes of salvaging something from the fiasco.

The Chechen insurgency has already morphed from a national independence movement into one seeking a caliphate for the entire North Caucasus.

That's the case with me and the Sochi Winter Olympics. Doku Umarov, the Chechen leader of the Islamist insurgents, had called for attacks on the Games. As the focus of the world's attention, they seemed the perfect target. Moreover, the closing ceremonies would be held

on Feb. 23, the 70th anniversary of Stalin's violent exile of the entire Chechen and Ingush nations.

As everyone knows, the Games and the closing ceremony passed without incident. I asked myself, "Why?" Have President Vladimir Putin and Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov so smashed the Islamists that all they can do is issue grandiloquent videos proclaiming a caliphate across the Caucasus or blow up the occasional bus?

The reason was far simpler: Umarov did not strike because he was dead. That death had been long rumored, and in Russia rumor remains a source of information worth taking into account. Thus far, there has been no information about the place, date or cause of death. More important now is the person replacing Umarov and the movement's probable direction under his tutelage.

The new leader is Aliasaskhab Kebekov, 42, who had been the spiritual leader and supreme Sharia judge of the Caucasus region. The first non-Chechen to lead the insurgency, he is an ethnic Avar from Dagestan, as was the iconic leader Shamil who combined strategic and spiritual gifts to lead a decades-long rebellion against the Russians in the mid-19th century.

Dagestan itself is less ethnically homogeneous than Chechnya and thus more difficult for Moscow to impose a leader like Kadyrov. "Dagestanis are much more Islamist, they are better integrated into global jihad, and they are more super-national," says Yekaterina Sokirianskaya, North Caucasus director for the International Crisis Group.

This might lead one to expect a more aggressive and far-reaching posture from the new leadership. But Kebekov has stated that he wants to pursue jihad in all areas "political, economic, information." He is well aware of what serious losses have been inflicted on Dagestani insurgents in recent years: 231 killed in 2012, 171 in 2013.

Under Umarov the original Chechen goal of national independence morphed into the goal of a Caucasian caliphate — a multinational state under Sharia law ruled by a leader who combines secular and spiritual functions. Now independence from Russia is not viewed as an end in itself but a means to an end — the caliphate.

Chechnya and Dagestan are valuable for their oil and their geo-political location, with Dagestan in particular offering a long coastline on the resource-rich Caspian Sea. For Russia, the intrinsic value of any region matters less than its remaining part of Russia. The Kremlin's two greatest fears are Yugoslavization and NATO encirclement.

The goals of Russia and the Caucasian caliphate are thus diametrically opposed. That would not be too much of a problem if the new leadership pursued a more evolutionary, educational and social direction, but in that volatile region that is hardly likely for very long. In fact, just a few days ago, four soldiers were killed in a bomb attack in Chechnya.

Kebekov's attention might be first drawn to the Crimean Tartars who comprise 15 percent of the population, had no wish to integrate with Russia and boycotted the referendum, earning them the ire of Crimea's Russian population. Though those populations coexisted well enough in the past, changed circumstances can change relations quickly. The younger

generation of Tartars is said to be more likely to radicalize if subjected to oppression by the Russian majority. If the Islamic insurgents could not spoil Putin's Olympics, maybe they can spoil his annexation.

But spoiling either the Olympics or the Crimea annexation is little more than the inflicting of a humiliation on the enemy, something which may not even serve the goal of the caliphate. It could easily draw down an asymmetrical vengeance as it has in the past from the Russian authorities who don't have to worry about pesky parliamentary committees investigating "enhanced techniques."

In time, however, the Islamists will realize that the goal of a Caucasian Caliphate has even less chance of achievement than Chechen independence. Russia is just too strong. The Islamists have no hope unless they can connect their cause with some greater force. And here is where a little prediction comes in.

Both of the leaders of Central Asia's largest countries are older than 70 and have no male heirs. President Nursultan Nazarbayev's rule of Kazakhstan has been less oppressive and more beneficial to the people than Islam Karimov's in Uzbekistan, but both men have been ruling their countries pretty much singlehandedly since Soviet times. Uzbekistan, which has more repression and thus more internal conflict, or vice versa, has its own Islamist movement, the Islamist Movement of Uzbekistan, or IMU.

But the problem of restive Islamic population does not end in Central Asia. It continues on into China's vast western province of Xianjiang with its Uighur majority, which by ethnicity, religion and language is closer to Baku than Beijing. The Arab Spring covered a vast swath of territory across North Africa and Egypt. Something of the same sort is possible in Central Asia. Where it will first erupt and who, if anyone, will emerge as an overall leader is anyone's guess.

The Chechen insurgency has already morphed from a national independence movement into one seeking a caliphate for the entire North Caucasus. It is possible that Kebekov or some future leader will have even greater aspirations, envisioning a caliphate that begins in the Caucasus and reaches to Almaty, Tashkent, Kashgar. Or perhaps this is no more than the fantasies of men who have oversimplified life to Koran and Kalashnikov, a caliphate for an hour.

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