Research Report: Chechen Refugees: Life, Loss, and the Politics of Violence among a Forgotten People

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On the cover: GUDERMES, CHECHNYA: Chechen elders from a nearby village block a convoy of Russian army troops during the early stages of the invasion on November 29, 1994 in Gudermes, Chechnya. By Northfoto
Introduction. This report answers the following question: under what conditions do displaced Chechens support militant violence against Russia? Exploring the conditions under which displaced peoples support insurgent movements has profound implications for both the intelligence and defense communities. Protracted insurrections are one of the more troublesome problems of international relations, and the data suggests that external support, from states, refugees, and especially diaspora communities, is often the decisive factor in determining insurgent success or failure.

The study of displaced Chechens in particular is especially important. This work sheds much needed light on the Chechen diaspora, a community that is increasingly viewed as a security threat. It is imperative that the Intelligence Community comprehend the dynamics, politics, and grievances that drive displaced Chechens to support violence. The North Caucasus insurgency has taken place in the largest country in the world, Russia, but has also spread well beyond those borders. As of this writing, a dozen North Caucasian insurgent groups have declared fealty to ISIS, and over a thousand North Caucasian militants fight in Islamic insurgencies in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria. Dozens more fight in Ukraine. While some come from Russia and Georgia’s Pankisi Gorge, the overwhelming majority come from the diaspora, which now numbers more
than 200,000. These fighters often rise quickly through the ranks to become leaders and trainers, helping to diffuse the tactical and operational lessons and technologies learned during the wars against Russia. Examining the drivers of displaced Chechen support for militant violence can help us better understand the potential threat these fighters might pose to the West. Indeed, while the Boston Marathon Bombing appears to be the act of a “lone wolf,” young Chechens are increasingly identifying with the violent, global jihadist movement; some are reportedly plotting terrorist attacks in Europe.¹

Second, the Chechen community scattered across the Caucasus and Europe is there to stay. Displaced Chechens live in large numbers throughout Europe. In spite of its size, the community has no experience with being immigrants. This generation of displaced Chechens is struggling, and in some cases refusing, to adapt to the laws and cultures of their host states. As this research has demonstrated, these adaptations have been particularly difficult for young men. It is not clear if these tendencies will continue, but this research gives us a baseline through which to observe and monitor future trends. No matter the eventual trajectory, it is imperative, given the proliferation of Chechen foreign fighters and terrorists, that the intelligence community comprehend the dynamics, politics, and grievances that drive displaced Chechens to support violence.

Prior to systematic investigation, such a study would expect finding little to no variation among respondents. Indeed, given the scale of destruction and violence committed against Chechnya, if any population held pro-violent attitudes towards Russia and Russian targets, it would be the Chechens. Yet, this research project reveals considerable differences in the support or rejection of violence among displaced Chechens. Gender, ideology, location, and age all play a role in shaping attitudes towards militant violence. In doing so, it elucidates the lived experiences of displaced Chechens in four different countries in order to identify and observe the factors influencing attitudes towards political violence. More importantly, this report reveals first-hand accounts of the individual tragedies of displaced Chechens and gives voice to their plight by revealing their struggles in their own words. Additionally, unpacking concepts like militarization, as well as combining a thick ethnographic examination with descriptive statistics regarding demography, economy, and political leanings of Chechen refugees, this research contributes to

the existing literature on forced migrations and conflict and the study of non-participant support for insurgent movements. In a more general sense, this study provides a template to understand popular support for political violence in other displaced communities, particularly Islamic refugees and diasporas.

**Ethnographic Insights into the Displaced Chechen Community.** The ethnographic approach allowed me to collect a wealth of granular data that provides an invaluable contribution to the study of non-participant support for insurgents. Employing an ethnographic approach facilitated my access into the community and afforded me an opportunity to identify a range of previously unknown potential influencing factors. Structured interviews allowed me to systematically collect one type of data related to the attitudinal support for insurgent violence. Participant observation offered me an opportunity to observe people and communities for a prolonged period of time so that I could identify a range of social interactions, behaviors, and potential influencing factors. Much of ethnographic research is exploratory in nature. I tried to minimize any potential biases or threats to data validity from employing snowball sampling by immersing myself in the Chechen refugee community. In addition to over a decade of observation, I lived among displaced Chechens in their same squalid conditions for nearly 4 years (The Republic of Georgia: 17 months in the Pankisi Gorge—Birkiani village, Duisi village, Jokolo village, Omolo village, and Tbilisi; Azerbaijan: 9 months in Baku; Poland: 9 months in Bialystok, Debak, Warsaw, and Wolomin; and Belgium: 6 months in Antwerp, Bruges, Brussels, Gent, Oostende, and Verviers). I shivered and huddled with them in the cold against the elements; I ate the same food, drank the same tainted water, developed the same health problems, and suffered harassment by the same security forces. With them, I also celebrated birthdays and weddings. With the other young men, I filled the boredom of some days by sparring (boxing, wrestling), engaging in impromptu athletic
contests (pull-ups, foot races, etc.), or watching videos of the war on cell phones or on computers at internet cafes. When possible, I watched the women prepare traditional fares. Throughout, ethnographic methods were integral in helping me become a part of the community and thus gain their trust to speak to me about such sensitive issues as support for insurgent violence. In addition to my total immersion in the displaced Chechen community and direct-participant observations, I conducted 301 structured interviews with a range of respondents: political elites, average civilians, former fighters, Chechens still active in the separatist movement as fighters and supporters, urbanities and rural dwellers, individuals from the mountains and lowlands, and individuals with varying degrees of education, ranging from university degrees to those who never finished secondary school.

The narratives below illustrate the kinds of data an ethnographic approach can generate. The first testimony is from a 25-year-old Chechen man in Baku, Azerbaijan and the second from a 55-year-old Chechen man in Pankisi Gorge, Georgia.

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The Chechens are not people who think of their stomach and pockets. This is a long fight. I like “Braveheart.” Why did William Wallace fight? He fought against injustice. When he began, the people [the English] treated him badly, but he was silent. After they killed his wife, he was a terrorist. This is Chechnya. Chechnya is small. Every family has lost family. Every single one. We have lost so much. And we were silent…I had a dream when I was a child. I used to see the packs of stray dogs running around the city, and I dreamed that I would someday find an island somewhere and I would take all the dogs there and feed them. I would take care of them. Now the roles are changed. Now I wish I could do that for my people. But, there is no island. There is nowhere that is safe. That is why I still fight. The Russians began this war, but we will end it. We must end it. There is no choice. There was only one William Wallace, but in Chechnya we have many, many William Wallaces. Wallace fought and died for his freedom and independence. Chechens have died for their freedom and independence, too. I think in the future Chechnya will be free.

All we did was defend our home. How many of us have been killed? Over 300,000 forced to leave. Over 100,000 killed. I grew up in Soviet times. We were taught in school to be brave and that heroes were those men who protected their homes, their nation. Tell me, how am I a terrorist? I fought all across Chechnya. I was in Grozny in both wars and at the end. I walked through the minefields. Tell me that I am not brave. Tell me that I was wrong to do what I was taught. Yet they still call me a terrorist for protecting my family and my home. I am told for that very reason that no other country wants me. What would they do if their homes were being bombed and their women, children, and old people—the innocent [people]—were being deliberately slaughtered? Would the world call them terrorists? What about those who betray their country and their homeland? These are the brave? These are our heroes? If I did not ask for war, but fought when war came to my nation, how can I be called a terrorist? How?

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To “think of your stomach and pockets” is a Chechen proverb referring to individuals who think only of their immediate desires.
The men in these vignettes in many ways came from two different Chechnyas. One was born in the capital city, Grozny, the other in a small village high in the southern mountain. One spent most of his life as a citizen of the Soviet Union, the other grew up knowing little but war. One finished university and held prominent positions in the government and resistance, the other never finished high school. One had a large family, and the other had lost his to the war. One desires an independent Chechnya ruled by traditional and democratic institutions, the other supports the idea of an Islamic Caucasus Emirate governed by sharia. Despite the various differences between these two Chechen men, there are striking similarities in how they view the struggle in Chechnya, the plight of the Chechen people, and the legitimacy of political violence committed against Russia. What are the lived experiences of Chechen refugees that drive either their support or rejection of political violence committed against Russia?

Findings. This research achieves three goals. First, it draws attention to the lives of displaced Chechens in the Caucasus and Europe. Many Chechens, especially in Georgia and Azerbaijan, continue to struggle on a daily basis to survive. Next, the research explores the conditions under which displaced Chechens support or reject militant violence against Russia. In doing so, it reveals surprising differences within and across the displaced Chechen communities. Finally, this research illustrates the obstacles and benefits inherent in conducting a long-term, systematic and ethnographic comparative study. Despite the methodological and security challenges, the study of attitudes towards political violence is an integral part of understanding insurgent movements. Although the intelligence community is rarely able to replicate such work, this report highlights the necessity of utilizing research by academics in order to understand insurgent movements. As this report demonstrates, ethnographic research contributes substantially to the empirical study of militants and militant supporters.

While this work raises more questions than it answers, it has nonetheless illustrated some important points concerning displaced peoples. First, location does matter. Political goals, regime type preferences, grievances, and even the willingness to speak about political violence all vary considerably by location. Displaced Chechens in Pankisi, for example, endure patently different experiences and, therefore, express markedly different sentiments than refugees in Belgium. In terms of support for militant violence, displaced communities both proximate and distant to the conflict appear to be more likely repositories of insurgent support.

Second, living conditions play an important role in shaping attitudes. While most recognized that deplorable living conditions can generate pro-violence sentiments, this study has demonstrated that relatively affluent environments can also drive support for violence. It is important to remember that the material characteristics of a location are not the only factor. Inclusion and cultural loss can also be a significant contributing factor to supporting political violence.
Third, the research demonstrates that, for most Chechens, the insurgency in Russia remains a local affair. Even those who support a trans-regional, Islamic Emirate do so in the belief that such a state is not an objective, but rather a means to achieve Chechen independence. However, this study also observed a growing trend in the number of Chechens supporting ISIS and its goal of establishing a new Caliphate.

Fourth, overall, the male participants in this study are more likely to desire maximal political goals, accept religious authority as political authority in the form of sharia, and support violence; however males 25–34 and 56–66 are the most likely to do so. Female Chechens in this study desire different political goals and regime types because, unlike males, they perceive that they will suffer in terms of social status in an emirate and under sharia. Consequently, the female participants’ material interests drive them to endorse less extreme political goals (such as autonomy in Russia), desire democracy or traditional forms of governance, and express less tolerance for political violence.

**Conclusion.** This report is about Chechen refugees. Yet, it is in many ways the story of many contemporary displaced peoples. As of the summer of 2015, the international media is awash with stories of thousands of new refugees fleeing conflicts in Afghanistan, Africa, Iraq, Syria, and elsewhere. Most are trying to reach Western Europe. In doing so, untold numbers have died. What does the future portend for these communities? I posit that the displaced Chechen experience described in this report can offer some valuable insights. First, like the Chechens, many of these refugees have no experience with migration. It is likely that they will experience the same fear, uncertainty, and isolation that the Chechens did, and still do, in their new homes. We have already seen that this new wave of refugees confronts the same bureaucratic challenges and frustrations in seeking official asylum. They will struggle to maintain a dignified standard of living, especially if they find themselves living in squalid conditions, as have many Chechen refugees. From their hosts, they may face prejudice, discrimination, and perhaps violence because of their different language and style of dress. The most educated among them, the doctors, lawyers, and businessmen, will be disappointed when they must take a job as a janitor. Most importantly, their young men may experience alienation and frustration sufficient to drive them to take up arms. The question remains: will these new refugees respond to these realities in similar ways as the Chechens? Or will their cultural identities and circumstances elicit divergent responses?

If the wars continue and these refugees are unable to return to their homes, new dynamics and pressures may emerge. Like the Chechens, they may feel the same tension between maintaining their culture and traditions and assimilating into their host societies. They may worry about the future for their children. They may also be targeted by insurgent groups or terrorists. Certainly, while we can only speculate as to the future for this new wave of refugees, analysts investigating these issues through empirical analysis can look to the Chechen case to understand, anticipate, and mitigate some of these problems.