

To Tame a Chechen Wolf: Shedding the Failing Frame of Salafism

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“They say we’re cowards—let them. We won’t just sit here in Chechnya and be exterminated. I warned that we would fight in Russia and there are a lot more targets...if someone spits at you in the face for half a year, wouldn’t you spit back just once? That’s what we did and we’ll do it again!”^[1]

—Shamil Basayev after raiding Budennovsk in 1995.

“Chechnya is not a subject of Russia, it is a subject of Allah,”
—Chechen independence slogan.

Introduction

The Islamist movement in Chechnya has run into a major roadblock. Unable to mobilize significant support from the population and fighting a sporadic guerrilla war against the Russians has significantly weakened the movement. The Islamist ideology of *Jihad* for a greater Islamic Chechen state is no longer working. The Chechen public is caught between forces vying for control of the political space; repressed by the Russian-supported Chechen government (who are intermingled with heavy-handed criminal networks) and the Chechen separatist rebels. Kidnappings, illegal arrests, torture, rape and other humanitarian abuses have increased parallel to the amount of pressure from the Russian government to capture or kill Chechen terrorists. While tactically the Islamist Chechen rebels are using guerrilla warfare to combat Russian control of their government, theoretically they are stuck in a downward-spiraling movement. But why have the rebels been unable to mobilize a large part of the uncommitted Chechen population? The answer is quite simple: they have become stuck in their own frame.

The frame used for the rebel movement in the beginning worked in tandem with the Chechen nationalists: Russia was suppressing Chechen independence and denying the population their Muslim identity. During the first Chechen war, this frame worked very well and there was little conflict between the nationalists and Islamists; however, during the second war, the Islamist rebels pulled away from the nationalists and shunned their frame for one crafted specifically for non-secular *Salafi* Muslims. The influx of foreign *Mujahadeen* fresh from the resistance against

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the Soviet-occupied Afghanistan brought with them money and ideology linked with *Salafism*. Most Chechens were distanced from serious religious study and their focus on Islam during the Communist years of the Soviet Union had waned dramatically. They were not familiar with this type of Islam and did not see a link between their Chechen identity and that of the *Salafists*. During the second war, the Islamists used frames similar to those used during the resistance in Afghanistan, the most prominent being the struggle against the 'infidel' Soviet occupiers. Although the Islamists wanted independence for Chechnya, the necessary condition for that separation, for them, was through a religious trajectory. Chechen Islamists hitched their frame to the *Salafists*: they claimed that Russia (and in a larger sense, the West) was waging a war of aggression against Islam and was responsible for problems in the Muslim world.^[2]

The Islamist movement in Chechnya (since the second war) failed to achieve its primary objective because the frame it used for the movement did not resonate with the Chechen population. Cultural resonance is the lifeblood of framing strategies and occurs, "when the frames used by activists fit within the existing repertoire of legitimate ideological constructions, and then provide movements with the cultural resources to dominate public framings of an issue."^[3] A movement cannot transform into actual mobilization unless the leaders can find a frame that resonates with potential participants.^[4] Over time, the Islamist movement in Chechnya lost the legitimacy needed to mobilize internal support for the cause. The failure to use language that fell within the cultural boundaries of the repertoire contributed to the weakening of the Islamist movement.

In this paper, I will argue that the reason the Chechen Islamists failed to sustain their movement through two regional conflicts lies in the frames they chose. Ineffective framing strategies during the second Chechen war mired the Chechen Islamists in a downward-spiraling movement. By contrast to the second war, the frames used in the first Chechen war resonated culturally among the grassroots populace as legitimate. During the second war, external sources inspired framing strategies, overshadowing the previous nationalist frame. The Islamist frame never took sufficient root to feed the Islamist movement and change the nature of Chechnya's fight for independence. The framing strategies of the Chechen Islamist rebels failed the independence movement because they exceeded the legitimate cultural repertoire^[5] and were unable to conform and align themselves within the boundaries of indigenous Chechen Islamism.

In this article I examine the use of framing in the Chechen Islamist movement. Chechens are fond of comparing themselves to the wolf, a strong, courageous and adept animal known for its fierce and tenacious spirit.^[6] In some perspectives, the wolves of Chechnya are fighting a fierce battle for their independence. Ineffective framing and poor mobilization tactics hinder the movement from its stated goals. In what follows, first I discuss why repression has a connection with Chechen mobilization by exploring the frames and framing contest of the Islamist Chechen rebels and Chechen government during the first and second wars.^[7] Next, I investigate why the framing strategies of the rebels failed to mobilize the Chechen public and examine how they have instead incapacitated the Islamist movement. While the Islamist and nationalist groups are not the only groups operating in the Chechen field, a discussion of the criminal network regulating much of the republic is beyond the scope of this article.

Soviet Repression and Chechen Mobilization Structures

According to Jack Goldstone, revolutions have two major components, a population motivated to rebel, and a state too weak to resist.^[8] In the case of Chechnya, decades of repression by the Soviet government, a downward spiraling economy and the desire to establish an independent state prepared the population to rebel. Brutal coercion by the Soviet government inspired passive public support for the resistance. After centuries of repression, there was a desire to, "eradicate the humiliation and injustices of the Soviet period."^[9] Prior to the downfall of the communist regime, the Soviet Union was considered a strong state. After the overthrow of the communist government, Russia's economy struggled to survive and the state apparatus had to overcome the

pitfalls of a new democracy. These factors helped to weaken the Russian state and create a political opportunity for Chechen mobilization.

Exclusion and Inclusion

The conflict between the Russian nation and Chechen separatists began long before 1991. The Soviet Union's role was much like that of an imperial colonizer. Over 300,000 Russians settled in Chechnya and the area became little more than a settler-colony over the last two centuries. The Chechen nationalist resistance could be characterized as a result of both exclusion and inclusion. For example, Chechens were included in the Soviet Union proper, and were forced to adopt Communist economic, social and political structures. They were also subject to exclusionary policies by being relegated to strictly agricultural and resource processing functions that stunted their potential economic growth. The Chechens were also religiously and culturally excluded from the rest of 'white Russia' and forced to become publicly secular and act as atheists. The mountainous lands were ruled as territories directly from Moscow.^[10] The North Caucasus' indigenous languages were suppressed and practice of Islam (as well as any other religion) was discouraged. Archeologist and ethnic Caucasian Aslan Tov, illustrates the parallel of the Russian domination of the North Caucasus to the behavior of colonizers, "the Russians always present their conquest of the Caucasus as a good thing, a gift to the people here. They say they brought us civilization. But they ignore that we already had our own customs, our own life, and our own culture."^[11]

From Religious Repression to Islamic Revival

For the Chechens, the early 1990s were a time of Islamic revival. This "reawakening" of the Muslim identity occurred in concert with Russia's *glasnost* political reforms. New mosques, *madrassas* and Islamic outreach programs began appearing in the region. Sebastian Smith, author of *Allah's Mountains* who spent several years in the region noted, "many people across the region were so ignorant about Islam that this was often less a revival than a rediscovery."^[12] Even the village mullah in Adygea, Mohammed Khafitsev recalls the suppression of the Muslim faith and his own self-taught struggle for piety,

"Until 1991, we were not allowed to observe our faith...for 75 years we had no religion. One mosque was left, but no one went. Adults still find it uncomfortable to stand and pray to God, but now it's coming back, especially among the children."^[13]

Muslims were beginning to rediscover their faith and the young were at the helm. Many traveled to Turkey or other countries in order to study the *Qur'an* and learn Arabic. After the 1991 secession, Muslim teachers from Saudi Arabia and other parts of the Middle East began moving to the region to teach in universities and to participate in public life.^[14] This would introduce the *Wahhabi* ideology to a population that had been detached from their religious roots for a long time. The Saudi Arabian teachers represented authority and authenticity of Islam and many of the students had no historical routine of the Islamic faith to provide them any alternative to compare it to. The fact that these instructors hailed from the sands of Mecca and Medina only added to their perceived credibility.

Religion provides meaning and perspectives on the world using moral systems which enhance integrated and ethical societies, but they can also serve to challenge and upset social, political and economic systems.^[15] During the first and second Chechen war, religion was used as a vehicle to legitimize political violence and to challenge a superpower through disruptive means, however, it was not enough to supply symbolic and emotional resources needed to sustain the movement over time.^[16] During the 1990s, Chechnya experienced extensive indiscriminate repression which facilitated the politicization of Islam. Mohammed Hafez, author of *Why Muslims Rebel*, argues the result of indiscriminate repression over a significant length of time was the

radicalization of the Chechen public and the legitimization of violence against Russian forces and civilians.[17] Terrorist acts against Russia began almost immediately after the first Russian invasion of Grozny. The Islamist rebels have used Russian repression as a way to legitimize their violence.

Dissent among the Wolves and Social Mobilization

According to social movement scholars Davenport, McAdam, McCarthy and Zald, dissent and mobilization is largely a result of three factors: political opportunity, mobilizing structures and cultural frames.[18] Dissent in this instance was a function of cultural frames of Chechen nationalism buttressed by an Islamic identity. Immediately after declaring independence in 1991 and upon getting wind of the Russian decision to crush the group, protests broke out. As Russian troops massed on the borders, Chechens relied on several mobilization structures and cultural frames to foster support for their resistance: a freedom to worship as Muslims, a national identity separate from Russia, and a reliance on global sympathy for their cause. They would incorporate support from foreign fighters called *bojeviki* from all over the region. Islamic fighters from the Ukraine, Baltics, veterans from the Afghan war and ex-Soviet officers flooded into the country. The foreign fighters that traveled to defend Chechnya during the first Chechen war were not there to promote an Islamic state, but instead by their admiration of the warrior culture and pursuit of freedom.[19] Smith states, "Religion played a crucial supporting role to the resistance, although this was not by any means a religious war of Moslem versus Christian...most Chechens were often quite ignorant, in an academic sense, about their faith." [20]

The history of conflict between the two countries, stemming mainly from the Soviet Union's suppression of Chechen identity, faith and culture, has been important in developing the Chechen movement. The collapse of the Soviet Union provided a political opportunity and a change in its repressive ability which signaled to the Chechen separatists that the time was right to pull away from the former Communist regime. Although the separatists recognized the opportunity for mobilization against a weakened Soviet state, repression continued against the Islamist rebels and eventually against the civilians themselves. Justice was doled out in an inconsistent and random manner with tactics including torture, random detention and massacres of alleged rebel collaborators. Aside from the uneven application of force, "police harassment against Chechens in other parts of the Russian Federation have also increased, with arbitrary identity-checks, arrests, and refusals to grant obligatory residency permits in cities such as Moscow." [21] Motivations for this type of activism take hold from years of collective repression, deprivation and the prospect of autonomy or independence through a particular political opportunity. Long periods of frustration over unmet expectations and a repressive social environment combined with a collective perception that the weakening and ultimate collapse of the communist Soviet Union provided an opportunity to demand independence and the possibility that this time, the Chechens would finally be successful.

Separatists relied on Islam as a mobilization structure and incorporated frames which used religion and nationalism providing a forum for collective organization along lines unique and intimate to the Chechen identity. The use of Islam as a mobilization structure was a particularly powerful choice because of the non-religious nature of the Communist Soviet regime and the fact that religious repression was one of the major grievances of the Chechen people. Religion not only provided the mobilization structure, but its symbolic weight was magnified because of the very fact that it had been forbidden. Logistically, the mosque provided a social network with pre-existing social connections as well as communications and command structures. The mosque and/or religious networks provided a collective vehicle with which groups of Chechens could mobilize for collective action.[22]

Framing processes must make use of themes familiar and shared among the participants in collective action.[23] The Chechen resistance movement was made up of individuals who had legitimate grievances against their Soviet oppressors and who collectively shared the optimism

that organized action could change their circumstances.[24] The framing processes used during the first war were an example of frames using a familiar cultural repertoire that incorporated themes and concepts shared within the Chechen community. During the first war, the resistance movement made use of both religious and nationalistic frames which worked together cohesively and helped to propel the collective action against the Soviet forces; however, during the second war, the framing processes became competitive against one another and split the movement whereby weakening it significantly. The framing processes ceased to be familiar to the Chechen population because they were saturated with *Salafi* rhetoric which did not have a foothold within the Chechen cultural repertoire.

The First Chechen War

War or Intifada?

The first Chechen war had many elements in common with the first Palestinian Intifada: mass demonstrations against what they perceived to be an occupier, heavy themes of nationalism and independence and an open relationship with the western press. Prior to the first Intifada, terror was used as an attention-grabbing tactic. Terrorism was used in the first Chechen war to bring international attention to their struggle for independence. These acts, comparable to initial Palestinian terror attacks proved that the Chechens could no longer be ignored.[25] These elements mobilized world attention for the Chechen state and provided a political opportunity for international resource mobilization to support a move for independence. Media coverage of the first Palestinian Intifada showed children throwing rocks at Israeli tanks, bringing to the world an image of David versus Goliath. In general, there was a feeling of sympathy for the Palestinians because they were perceived as the 'underdog.' Using the tool of emotions, Palestinians were able to gain and mobilize significant international support for their cause. Similarly, the Chechens were able to work hand-in-glove with Western media outlets and televised humanitarian tragedies and an overwhelming conventional gap between the Russians and themselves. In addition, the Chechens could claim they were seeking democracy and freedom, buzzwords that would inherently incite support from the "good" west versus the "evil" Russia. Although Russia had recently moved away from Communist ideologies and encouraged the Caucasus Republics' freedom and autonomy, it almost appeared they went back on their word when they surrounded Grozny, the capital of Chechnya and shelled its inhabitants. The nationalist leadership played to this disparity in conventional strength and cried out for world support.

Framing Strategies for the First Chechen War

Chechen President Dudayev and the leader of the Islamist Chechen Wolves, Shamil Basayev used several framing strategies in the first Chechen War to mobilize public support for the conflict. The two leaders of Chechnya were not in a competitive or contentious framing contest to win a fraction of support. They worked in tandem to mobilize support for the first war and to depict an image of the evil, overbearing Russian giant denying the proud Chechens their freedom. Framing requires presenting diametrically opposed version of events to support political claims and tactics.[26] Quintan Wiktorowicz cites four framing strategies that contribute to framing contests within a movement's struggle for authority: vilification, exaltation, credentialing and de-credentialing.[27] With respect to the first Chechen war, these four strategies were successful in mobilizing popular support for the nationalist resistance against the Soviet Union. The Islamists and the government shared the same diagnostic frame: Russia was suppressing Chechen independence and denying the population their Muslim identity.

Vilification

Dudayev and Basayev were able to depict the Soviet Union as the ultimate villain. Historical memory made vilification even easier. Based on historical events, centuries of repression, conflict,

deportation, genocide, racism and outlawing religious freedom, vilification of Russia as the “other” and evil was not a stretch. Russia was seen as a “colonizer” of Chechnya, therefore, the nationalist’s desire to separate from Russia was understood as a response to colonialism.

The phrase, ‘Never again!’ resonated not only among the Chechen victims of Russian genocide or deportation, but was a successful frame because the world’s collective memory aligns the phrase with the Jewish Holocaust and carries the emotional tag of survival.[28] Dudayev was able to use this phrase and mobilize a public relations strategy including publications bolstering the Chechen identity and fostering pride in a unique and historic republic effectively polarizing the Chechen public into supporters or non-supporters. Dudayev’s mantra was specifically nationalistic, but he did not avoid using religious rhetoric when he thought it would behoove the cause. Basayev took the lead in the *jihad* frame and promoted an Islamic state ruled legally under *shari’a*. Name-calling and maligning against Russian non-believers also helped Basayev to rally international support for the cause.[29] The amount of international monetary, ideological and manpower support added strategic depth to the movement.

Exaltation

The framing contest between Dudayev and Basayev during the first Chechen war involved little exaltation. It was unnecessary for either man to thrust intelligentsia against each other as they were both on the same team. Dudayev already had plenty of fuel to burn with Russian elitism and years of marginalization from Russian intellectuals labeling the Chechens as ‘backwater’ and uneducated peasants. Dudayev was able to mobilize a public relations strategy including publications exalting the Chechen identity and fostering pride in a unique and historic republic effectively polarizing the Chechen public into supporters or non-supporters. He was able to convince the public that through sacrifice and effort, the dream of an independent Chechnya was not unreachable. Basayev’s job was just as easy. Demanding a return to Islam and defending oneself from aggression of the ‘infidels’ was an easy sell to international audiences who sympathized with the cause, not to mention it seemed a replay of Russian aggression in Afghanistan. During the first Chechen war the Islamist rebels used a ‘soft’ sell focusing mostly on nationalism and the freedom to worship. This would be much different during the second war where violent acts and terror would be marketed in a ‘hard’ sell to more extreme and radical Islamist supporters around the world.

Credentialing

To mobilize supporters for a cause, the leaders must have character, trustworthiness and credible expertise. The leader must establish the authority to speak for their members and to represent the movement at large.[30] The more status or perceived knowledge the frame articulator has from the point of view of the potential participants, the more the frames will resonate.[31] Although trust between Dudayev and the Chechen public was shaky at best, Basayev managed to build up credibility through militant acts against the Russian forces. With every defiant act against the overwhelming conventional Russian military, Basayev’s credibility would increase. Dudayev was good at articulating the nationalistic rhetoric, but Basayev shouldered the credibility requirement. Wictorowicz defines three criteria for credibility: the person must be knowledgeable; they must have character and be logical.[32] Although Basayev did not have an extensive or impressive education, his experience fighting the Russians in the first war lent him credibility and respect. His stubborn nature and ability to follow through on promises enhanced his character among both the Chechens and his Russian enemies. Whether or not Basayev possessed logic would depend on who the question is directed to. The Chechens who fought along side Basayev would argue that he was completely logical and his actions would be seen as rational. If his opponents decried him as illogical they could at least agree that he was consistent.

De-Credentialing

It is natural that in any movement, one side would try to discredit and undermine the other. Dudayev and Basayev did not intend to discredit each other; in fact, they defended and protected each other within their respective spheres of influence. Their efforts focused instead on discrediting the Russian invaders. The Russians helped this effort along with each act of indiscriminate repression against the Chechen public. Dudayev and his propaganda team used historical memory and socio-economic hardships to garner support for the nationalist movement in the first war. President Yeltsin added fuel to the fire via his inconsistency in dealing with the Chechen republic. He hurt Russia's credibility by delivering one message to the world audience filled with independence rhetoric and then redacted it when his forces invaded Chechnya in order to force it to stay in the Russian Federation.

Although it seemed Dudayev and Basayev were working as a team, with different tactics and strategies, but for the same goal, each knew the boundary of the other. Dudayev left the religious framing to Basayev and Basayev left most of the nationalism framing strategies to Dudayev. There was not a high level of competition between the two and the framing contest was not adversarial, but instead, mutually beneficial. They were able to share resources and for at least three years, work together for the same cause.

The Second Chechen War

The second Chechen war was characterized by four factors: limited amount of journalistic coverage, Islamist framing, terrorism and indiscriminate repression by Russian forces. In 2000, the Russians captured Grozny, pushed the Chechen militants to the mountains in the south and during the next six months, the Chechen rebels regrouped and hit back with ambushes and suicide bombs. The Russians lacked the ability to control the republic and attract popular support. For the rebels, what had primarily changed was a significant increase in the influence of foreign Islamic militants and *Salafi* rhetoric. Leaders in the *Salafi* movement saw Chechnya as the next battleground for their *jihad* against the Soviet infidel; for the fighters, it was not about Chechen independence, but a continuation of the battle in Afghanistan.

Islamism would have a much greater role in the second conflict. The rhetoric was eerily similar to that of *al-Qaeda*. One fighter claimed, "Our objective is to raise the word of *Allah* and establish Islamic rule everywhere."^[33] The Chechens would fight the second war for many reasons: the president fought for the survival of the republic and to maintain independence, some fighters fought for the thrill of it, and others fought for the Islamic rule in the North Caucasus. One rebel leader expressed the difference between the first and second Chechen war, "In the first war, we fought under the banner of 'freedom for Chechen independence] or death.' In this war, we are fighting under the banner of Islam."^[34] The attraction for young Chechen males was a sense of unity, membership in something with purpose and a lack of employment opportunities.^[35] The *Salafists* in Chechnya were reluctant to allow any coverage by the Western press, a tactic used to the rebels' advantage during the first war. Instead, they used *Salafi* propaganda websites to advertise their bloody warfare tactics and to recruit other foreign fighters to the *jihad*.

Framing Strategies in the Second Chechen War

The framing strategies for the first Chechen war centered on nationalism, but were supported by the ideology of Islam. The reverse was true for the second war. The Islamists and nationalists did not share the same diagnostic frame. Chechen Islamists hitched their frame to the *Salafists*: they claimed that Russia (and in a larger sense, the West) was waging a war of aggression against Islam and was responsible for problems in the Muslim world.^[36]

The second war was the Islamists' war. Basayev fully bought into the *Salafist* ideology. Because Basayev had the credibility, charisma, character and vision, not to mention his single-minded willingness to die for the cause; he was the perfect mouthpiece for the *Salafist* movement in Chechnya.

One significant difference between the first war and the second war was the tenuous relationship between Basayev and the new Chechen president (whom had beaten Basayev in the 1997 election), Aslan Maskhadov. During the first war, Basayev and President Dudayev worked as a team to frame the war as a war for independence for an Islamic Chechnya. The framing contest between the two leaders was not competitive in nature, but complimented each other's efforts. The second war was marked by a contentious framing contest between Maskhadov and Basayev. The *Salafi* rhetoric and framing tactics became more intense and overshadowed Maskhadov's calls for independence and freedom. Part of the reason the *Salafi* frame was more prominent, was the prolific internet-based propaganda featuring terrorist attacks on Russian centers. Basayev and his *Salafist* field commander and Saudi national, Ibn al-Khattab were able to cut off any extensive western media coverage and the only information flowing out came from their propaganda network.

Vilification

Little changed in Basayev's vilification strategy between the first and second war. Old feelings of humiliation and resistance between the Chechens and Russians were still alive but had been publicly usurped by the *Salafi* effort to frame the war as a fight against the "infidel" Soviet Union. Ibn al-Khattab, a Saudi Arabian national who had migrated to Chechnya to help liaison between *Salafi* fighters and the Islamist Wolves, played heavily on Islam's success in Afghanistan and used Russia's violent counterterrorist actions in the cities as tactics to show the brutality and indiscriminate repression directed at Chechen civilians. The Islamists were able to integrate their identities with injustice and agency frames to distinguish them from the "other" Russian opponents and bystanders.[\[37\]](#)

Vilification was also used by Basayev against Maskhadov. Basayev did not respect the president, primarily because Maskhadov couldn't control him. Basayev accused the president of pretending to be a Muslim. Maskhadov did not like the *Salafi* brand of religious fanaticism and continued to frame the war as a fight for Chechen independence. He argued that Khattab and the foreign fighters were skewing the war to be about their cause and were ultimately jeopardizing the fight for an independent state. He used name-calling and vilification strategies to discredit Khattab and Basayev.

Exaltation

During the second war, Basayev propped up Khattab and other Sunni intellectuals in order to sell the Islamist theme. He referred to Khattab as a "lion" and pointed to his more than fourteen years of experience fighting in a *jihad* against the Russians. Saudi Arabian donors had provided funds to set up *madrassas* who preached the *Salafi* version of Islam and which exalted *Wahabbi* learned scholars. Because Islam had been repressed throughout decades of communist rule, Chechens were rediscovering their faith. There was a lack of Sufi scholars that could teach Islam from the perspective Chechen culture. There was not much corporate knowledge of Islam, so when the teachers and scholars spoke there was a feeling among the younger Chechen men that they were the 'enlightened' ones. Because many of the scholars who taught in the *madrassas* were from Saudi Arabia, the home of the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, added more weight to their stature. The young men that joined the movement, joined for reasons similar to other Islamist movements: financial, spiritual and emotional incentives.[\[38\]](#)

Maskhadov struggled with this framing strategy. There were no nationalist heroes to hold up for the Chechen public as magnets to entice support (except Basayev) and Maskhadov couldn't muster international sympathy while Khattab and his *Salafi* cohorts were flashing images of dead Russian civilians across the globe. Russian media played up the 'Chechen terrorist' frame to rally international support to their side and to buffer against humanitarian backlash against their brutal repression within the Chechen cities. Maskhadov lost control over the criminal element within the country and soon found that there was little he could do except push the frame from the first war: nationalism first, Islam second.

Credentiaing

Basayev used political and social mileage out of the first war to garner trust and to mobilize support for the Islamist cause. Some Russian opponents labeled Basayev and his movement as radical. Uncompromising denial and rejection of existing reality colors any radical social movement, and was definitive in the case of Chechnya. Some researchers assert that a radical is not simply just a rebel, but a visionary and an activist.^[39] With every act of defiance against the Russian government; Basayev played up his role as a visionary and built up status in the minds of his followers. He was able to use the frame of Islam to entice support among a segment of the Chechen population and more importantly, with foreign fighters. Basayev's credibility was an important factor in both Chechen conflicts, but his efforts resonated more on an external level than internal. Over time, Basayev's credibility grew less and less. The Chechen people were not achieving what he promised. There was no security, no stability and more importantly, no freedom.

Maskhadov had the opportunity to gain a great deal of credibility immediately after taking office. If he would have cleaned up the corruption within the government, gotten a firm hold on the violent entrepreneurs within the country and established a patron-client relationship with the rebel groups to ensure control, he would have established a strong level of credibility among the Chechen population, not to mention with the Russian government. He failed on all accounts.

De-Credentiaing

Throughout the second Chechen war, Basayev and Maskhadov made attempts to discredit each other. Basayev attacked Maskhadov's level of commitment to Islam. He pointed out that when Maskhadov announced full *shari'a* law in 1999, he was obligated to relinquish presidential power. When he did not resign from his position, Basayev formed a Commander's Council that opposed Makhadov and took the issue to Chechnya's Supreme Shari'a Court. The court was filled with Maskhadov supporters, but they agreed with Basayev's argument questioning the role of the country's secular parliament. The Shari'a Court suspended the parliament and in response, the parliament declared the Shari'a court unconstitutional because it was staffed with presidential supporters rather than constitutionally appointed. Basayev's personal vendetta against Maskhadov outweighed his crusade against the secular parliament. In a complete reversal of his earlier case, Basayev began bashing the parliament for turning the public's attention away from Maskhadov.^[40] Supporters of the president jumped on Basayev for failing to adhere to his Islamist party line and used the situation to discredit his cause.

Why the Islamist Frame Failed

The Islamist movement in Chechnya has weakened significantly. The framing strategies used by Basayev and his *Salafi* supporters did not resonate with the Chechen population, Basayev lost credibility with the public and the framing contest between Basayev and Maskhadov resulted in a draw. Neither side provided what the Chechen public really needed, namely security, stability and relief from indiscriminate Russian repression. The framing strategies of the Islamists failed the

Chechen independence movement for two reasons: 1) the frame exceeded the legitimate cultural repertoire^[41] and 2) lack of diversification of framing strategies.

The first reason the framing strategies for the Islamists failed rest on the gap between the frame and the previous beliefs, life experiences or cultural narratives of the Chechen population.^[42] There was little consumption of the frames provided by the Islamists. The shift from frame alignment to frame resonance on a wide scale never happened. There was a weak relationship between the Islamist frame and the Chechen cultural environment. Chechen culture had been defined by centuries of foreign occupation, repression of indigenous language, religion and tradition. Bringing in *Salafism* to a culture that did not share the same narrative doomed the movement to failure. The Islamists failed to regenerate the frame in a way that would accomplish “consensus mobilization.”^[43] Chechens could not identify with, nor perpetuate the *Salafist* frame. There was a decrease in participants’ commitment over time because attempts to reassert a collective identity failed to resonate with a culturally distinct population.^[44] Without shared meanings and definitions, there was a gap between organization and action.^[45] The *Salafist* frame drew on the basic cultural element of Islam, but did not draw on the indigenous cultural symbol, language or identities of the Chechens.^[46] It was for this reason that the frame did not reverberate with constituents and which crippled mobilization.

Williams and Kubal assert the “frame-culture relationship can be conceptualized as a process of frame producers appropriating elements of the larger culture and using them to pursue their goals both regarding the movement and changing aspects of society.”^[47] This is precisely where the Chechen Islamists failed. They chose the wrong strategies and tactics based on the available repertoire of collective actions.^[48] The legitimate cultural repertoire for Chechnya would use elements of nationalism, pride and would essentially go back to the framing strategy used in the first war. Themes of independence and freedom resonated among the population whose cultural repertoire consisted of periodic rebellion as a response to decades of Russian repression. The *Salafist* goal of a pan-Islamic world was too broad for consumption by the Chechen public.

The second reason the Chechen Islamist frame has failed was little diversification of framing strategies. A movement can have several different frames swirling around in it. The frame that is used is the one which resonates more widely among the population. The Islamists have championed one frame and have failed to deviate from it. Narrowing down framing choices limits the flexibility of the movement whereby weakening it over time. Ibn al-Khattab’s role as broker between al-Qaeda and the Wolves chimed the death knell for the movement.^[49] The primary reason the movement sustained over some time was Basayev and Khattab’s ability to mobilize external resources (fighters, guns and money). Basayev stubbornly clung to his vision of an Islamist Chechnya, but in the cultural repertoire of the *Salafi* tradition. By using the frame too long, Basayev lost credibility and the ability to speak for the Chechen independence movement.

Conclusion

The Chechen Wolves are still fighting their battle for independence. They are mired in a downward-spiraling movement that has been plagued by ineffective framing strategies. The frames used in the first Chechen war resonated among the people because they had legitimacy in the cultural repertoire. For centuries the Chechens have been struggling for independence from foreign rule. Framing war as a struggle for freedom resonated among most, if not all Chechens. The framing contest between the Chechen President and the rebel leader was not contentious and mutually enhanced the movement for independence. During the second war, framing strategies migrated to an external source of inspiration and overshadowed the nationalist frame. The nature of the framing contest between the new Chechen president and the same rebel leader was competitive and strategic. *Salafism* failed to resonate with the public and was not flexible enough to shift to a frame that would mobilize more support in order to sustain the movement. Other factors complicate the pursuit for peace; namely an extensive criminal and violent entrepreneurial network, a corrupt government with little legitimacy among the public and

indiscriminate repression by the Russian military. The only likely option for movement success is to shed the frame of *Salafism* and restructure the Islamist movement to recuperate public support using familiar and successful framing strategies of independence, nationalism and religion.

In 2006, the Wolves' revered leader, Shamil Basayev was killed by Russian forces in Ingushetia and his death was heralded by many Russian anti-terrorism officials as a victory. Russian President Vladimir Putin called Basayev's death, "deserved retribution," referring to Basayev's participation in the 2004 Beslan school attack and other violent attacks on Russian civilians and military units.^[50]

The howls of the Chechen Wolves have quieted for now. Many of the Chechen rebels have been absorbed into the national army, and violent outbursts have subsided as prior rebel leader and new Chechen president, Ramzan Kadyrov attempts to put Chechnya back together. The country still faces threats from elements of violent entrepreneurship and fringe religious groups headquartered in neighboring Ingushetia and North Ossetia. The frame of *Salafism* is all but dead now, however, Kadyrov still carries the challenge of blending religion and nationalism while repelling Russian oppression and countering or co-opting the various elements of organized crime within Chechnya.

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