

Explaining the Ideological Evolution of Insurgencies: The North Caucasus, 2007-2015

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Key question

- What factors inside and outside insurgent groups explain the ideological evolution of insurgencies?

Additional questions

- What is the extent of variance and change in the ideology articulated by insurgent leaders in Dagestan and Kabardino-Balkaria, 2007-2015?
- How do leaders adapt ideologies to local audiences and negotiate ideological change?
- How do changes in ideology relate to changes in both the composition of groups and their broader operating environment?



What is ideology and why does it matter?

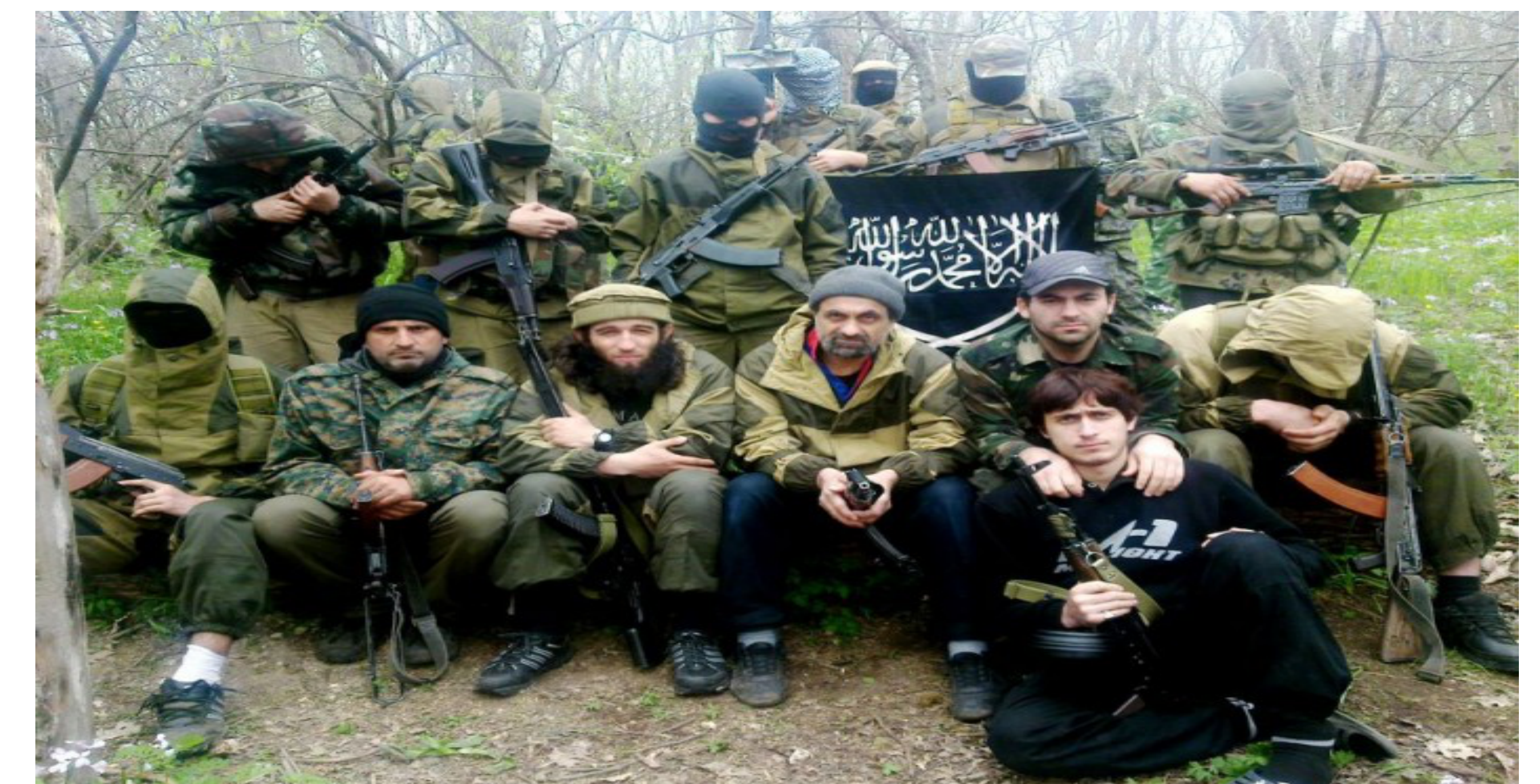
- Political violence is about more than physical acts: it is about ideas and therefore ideology.
- Ideology helps establish a group's identity, the challenges it faces, and its aims and objectives in meeting those challenges.
- It provides a framework for interpreting the world and establishes the ethical, moral and normative principles for action.
- People's perceptions of the world affect what they do and the actions they consider acceptable. Ideologies shape those perceptions.
- Ideas cannot be reduced to concrete factors like material context and structural features. Even instrumental explanations presume ideology to be important to the targets of that instrumentality.

Approach

- Analyse the statements of Caucasus Emirate leaders in Dagestan and Kabardino-Balkaria to identify commonalities and differences. This will use a large corpus of Russian-language leadership statements transcribed and coded by the author.
- Compile a database of insurgency-linked individuals and map their social networks.
- Identify changes in political opportunities using media and human rights reporting and semi-structured interviews with people from the region.
- Examine the relationship between changes in how the conflict is framed, insurgent networks and operating environments.

Improving our understanding of ideology

- Ideology is not integrated into many explanations of political violence, even when its importance is acknowledged.
- Many people either focus exclusively on a set of core texts or argue that ignorance of such texts demonstrate that ideology is irrelevant.
- Ideologies should not be understood in all-or-nothing terms: Explanations of political violence that ignore people's interpretations are as incomplete as those that focus exclusively on them.
- Ideologies should be understood as living entities, with leaders and members continually negotiating perceptions of the world.
- We need to understand how networks and political environments influence ideologies, and how ideologies influence them.



Weakness as a driver of ideological change

- The Caucasus Emirate leadership continually sought to expand its support base: from Chechnya to the North Caucasus, then to Russia's Muslims, then to the umma and global jihadists.
- Expansion driven by weakness at its core, as military losses, amnesties, and soft policies weakened group strength and support.
- Leadership was a negotiated process and weakness undermined leaders' ability to impose their own agenda and preferences.
- The practical difficulties faced by the insurgency were reflected in how it framed the conflict, which in turn impacted its appeal.
- The loss of ideological leaders undermined the insurgency's unique identity and ability to respond to global developments.



The value of a North Caucasian perspective

- Studies of jihadist groups and their ideologies have focused on Arabic-speaking groups in Muslim-majority countries. Yet most Muslims are not native Arabic speakers, and many other countries have sizeable Muslim minorities. Russia provides an opportunity to understand how radical Islamic ideas are adapted to and by audiences in such places.
- The North Caucasus insurgency has been in operation for a long time, allowing us to examine extensive changes in group ideologies – and the factors inside and outside groups that may help explain them.
- The post-2007 insurgency in the North Caucasus is understudied and often misinterpreted. However, it is important to our understandings both of an internal conflict facing a major world power and of the experiences of ethnic North Caucasians currently fighting elsewhere.