

Militants of the North Caucasus have a new leader

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A statement from Ali Abu-Muhammad (born Aliaskhab Kebekov), who was a Sharia Judge in the Caucasus Emirate (a virtual Islamic state formed by North Caucasus militants), was published on the Internet on 18 March, confirming the death of the previous leader of the North Caucasus underground, Doku Umarov, rumours of which had been spread over the past few months. No circumstances of Umarov's death were revealed. Kebekov stated that he had been elected the leader of the Emirate. In his speech he announced the continuation of jihad and called upon all North Caucasus Muslims to join the fight. He did not however make any threats of terrorist attacks.

The new rebel leader (born in 1972) comes from Dagestan and is an ethnic Avar (Avars form the largest ethnic group in Dagestan). He probably joined jihad in 2009, and has only fought in Dagestan. Already in 2010, Umarov nominated him the Emirate's Sharia judge. He speaks Arabic, and his Russian is poor. According to unconfirmed data, Kebekov had studied in Syria before joining the rebels. Judging from information on his participation in the illegal alcohol trade in the 1990s (for which he was sentenced to a fine), he is a new convert, like most North Caucasus jihad fighters.

Commentary

- The fact that Kebekov became the first non-Chechen leader of the Caucasian militants marks the culmination of a trend shifting the weight of fighting in the Caucasus from Chechnya to Dagestan, a process which has been observed over the past few years. On the one hand, this is an effect of the Chechenisation policy (stabilisation of the situation in Chechnya and the defeat of Chechen troops) and mass departures of Chechen militants to Syria. On the other hand, this is also an effect of the rapid development of radical Islam in Dagestan. It should be expected that Dagestan will remain the centre of jihad in the North Caucasus in the immediate future, while the military underground will play a smaller role in the other republics.
- While support for Kebekov is unquestionable in Dagestan, it is not so obvious in the other republics. One proof of this is the fact that the rebels were leaderless for a long time following Umarov's death (the first rumours of his death appeared towards the end of 2013), which was probably the effect of disputes about who the leader should be (when Umarov was alive, it was speculated that his successor would be Aslambek Vadalov, the last influential Chechen War veteran, an ethnic Chechen). Kebekov might also have problems establishing contacts with international Islamic terrorist organisations, which

have thus far been facilitated by Chechen emigrants in the Middle East and Turkey. His taking power may thus result in fragmentation of the Emirate and an even stronger homogenisation of the Dagestanian underground.

- The new emir will most likely want to prove that Umarov's death has not weakened the underground. Therefore, an activation of jihadists may be expected in the immediate future. However, it is quite unlikely that their activity will reach beyond sporadic military action (attacks on police stations and officers, etc.), since serious shortages of conscripts have been noted in the underground (effective anti-terrorist actions and departures to the jihad in Syria). However, this does not remove the risk of terrorist attacks, as proven by the attacks in Volgograd last year (staged by a local armed group from Dagestan).