

## ANZOR ASTEMIROV: FROM MILITARY DILLETANTE TO LEADING POLITICAL STRATEGIST

*Kevin Daniel Leahy*

*The past two years have witnessed the emergence of Anzor Astemirov as one of the main ideologists of the rebel movement in the North Caucasus. He has grandly claimed responsibility for splitting the movement in late 2007 by conspiring with rebel leader Doku Umarov to establish the so-called Caucasus Emirate. This political achievement, in tandem with other political-military strategies he has helped develop over the past several years, marks him out as an actor of some significance within the often-opaque political structures of the Caucasus Emirate.*

**BACKGROUND:** To casual observers of the situation in the North Caucasus, Anzor Astemirov is probably best remembered for leading an abortive rebel attack on the city of Nalchik, the capital of the republic of Kabardino-Balkaria, in October 2005. Doomed to failure before it ever began (local authorities were seemingly forewarned by informants) this

Astemirov should not shoulder the blame for this catastrophe alone. The raid on Nalchik was in fact planned, if not carried through, by late Chechen guerrilla leader Shamil Basayev. Watching proceedings unfold from a safe vantage point overlooking the city, Basayev declined to commit any of his own handpicked commandos to the fray and had reportedly left



operation quickly degenerated into a fiasco with local pro-government forces effectively routing Astemirov's inexperienced young charges.

the vicinity long before the final shot was fired in Nalchik. Astemirov's self-appraisal of his first command of a large-scale military operation hinted at his true value to the North Caucasus insurgency – his political talent. Deftly spinning the Nalchik raid as 'the first step on the path of the jihad', Astemirov preferred to skirt the awkward fact that dozens of inexperienced young fighters were sent to their deaths under his command. 'Our dead are in paradise, whereas their dead are in hell', he remarked tartly, 'not everything turned out as we would have liked.'

To all appearances, Astemirov escaped censure by his rebel colleagues for his involvement in this debacle. Indeed, he has since been appointed chairman of the rebels' Sharia court – in effect, the third most influential post in the rebels' political-military apparatus. The fact that his political standing has recovered, indeed drastically improved, in the three years since the Nalchik catastrophe indicates three things: firstly, that Astemirov is possessed of considerable political skill; secondly, that he enjoys strong popularity among the rebel rank and file; and thirdly, that he is well-connected with the various power-brokers among the Emirate's leadership. Early last year Astemirov provided a public demonstration of his political acumen by furnishing a leading rebel website with a detailed account of his role in the negotiations that led to the creation of the Caucasus Emirate. Palpably self-serving, but historically useful nevertheless, Astemirov's account details discussions he had with Basayev in 2005 about the possibility of his 'Yarmuk' Jamaat joining the rebels' greater Caucasus Front. This account has Astemirov virtually dictating the terms of Yarmuk's future cooperation to Basayev – an improbably haughty tone for a military and political dilettante to adopt when facing a legendary field-commander such as Basayev.

Indeed, this account has all the appearances of a classic piece of political chicanery: it elevates Astemirov, in terms of political status, to an equal standing with the talismanic Basayev, now conveniently dead and unable to confirm or dispute this sequence of events. Furthermore, in light of the October 2007 declaration of the Caucasus Emirate, Astemirov emerges from this account as the man who was right all along, agitating for the immediate proclamation of a Sharia-based state, while equivocators like

Basayev urged a 'softly-softly' approach lest the rebels should alarm the West and confuse their own rank and file.

**IMPLICATIONS:** Astemirov's political position has been further strengthened by a definite, though hardly dramatic, increase in rebel activity in his native Kabardino-Balkaria in 2008. Last January, Astemirov and his organization successfully carried out the assassination of Anatoly Kyarov, head of Kabardino-Balkaria's anti-organized crime directorate (UBOP). Taking full advantage of the public relations opportunity afforded by this assassination of a high-ranking police official, Astemirov claimed that Kyarov had been a major drugs dealer, also accusing him of involvement in child slavery and prostitution rings. This denouncement is consistent with a broader rebel strategy designed to marry specific military objectives – the assassination of Kyarov, for instance – with broader, popular social mandates such as opposition to social vices like drug taking and drug dealing, alcohol abuse and gambling. These social nuisances are conveniently proscribed by the code of Islamic laws – the Sharia – that defines Astemirov's political outlook.

Astemirov has long been an ideological proponent of this cunning strategy, which has been pioneered to considerable effect in Ingushetia and North Ossetia, where alleged drug dealers have been harassed and murdered while rebel arsonists have targeted gambling arcades and premises distributing alcohol. Astemirov is also in favor of tactics recently pioneered in Ingushetia whereby the homes of ethnic Russians have been burned down, either on the grounds that the victims had been contravening some aspect of Sharia law or because they had been collaborating with the local authorities. One of Astemirov's chief

lieutenants has elaborated on the rationale for adopting such an irreconcilable attitude toward the Russian population of the region, observing that '[t]he vast majority of Russian colonists are informers, employees and agents of the occupation structures.'

These ruthless methods of continuing the struggle against Russian rule in the North Caucasus have been eagerly enacted by younger rebel leaders like Astemirov in Kabardino-Balkaria and Akhmed Yevloyev, alias 'Magas', in Ingushetia. Unlike his counterpart in Ingushetia, Astemirov cannot lay claim to a catalogue of military successes. His efforts to establish a robust rebel organization in Kabardino-Balkaria have thus far met with only



modest success. In terms of his political profile, Astemirov is entirely different from colleagues like Magas and Doku Umarov in that the political power he currently wields has not, to invoke Mao's famous euphemism, grown out of the barrel of a gun. Instead, his political strength derives almost entirely from his reputation as a learned Islamic scholar (educated in the Middle East, Astemirov is fluent in Arabic). His successful campaign to make the imposition of Sharia law the central plank of the rebel's political platform has won him strong support among the younger generation of rebel fighters and activists; and his clever manipulation of subsequent public

relations opportunities (his internet article 'How we prepared the declaration of the Caucasus Emirate', the Kyarov assassination) have further garnished his reputation in this increasingly important constituency.

**CONCLUSIONS:** For most advocates of the Emirate project, the definitive split in the rebel ranks occasioned by the October 2007 proclamation of the Caucasus Emirate was a welcome development. For Anzor Astemirov and likeminded colleagues, cutting themselves off once and for all from the group gathered around Akhmed Zakayev, a London-based Chechen nationalist, was a necessary purification of the rebel agenda which has now – at least on the face of things – been brought

closer into accordance with the so-called ideology of global jihad. But Astemirov has also somewhat instrumentalized the Emirate project in the interests of securing his own narrow political objectives. As we have seen, his internet article 'How we prepared the declaration of the Caucasus Emirate' was, in several respects, self-serving and therefore highly political. Realizing that his relative lack of military experience and achievements places him at a certain disadvantage vis-à-vis other rebel luminaries, Astemirov has been forced to compensate by bringing his full array of political skills to bear whenever opportunity presents itself. The adeptness with which he has done so should mark him out as a figure of considerable import to those interested in the internal political workings of the Caucasus Emirate.

**AUTHOR'S BIO:** Kevin Daniel Leahy holds a postgraduate degree from the University College Cork, Ireland.