



Chechens in Afghanistan 3 (Flash from the Past): Diplomats, yes, but fighters?

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Following the authoritative account of Chechens – or rather lack of Chechens – in Afghanistan by Christian Bleuer, and how they have frequently been reported on, but rarely encountered, AAN’s Kate Clark here describes her own experiences with Chechens in 2000. In January of that year, she reported on the opening of a Chechen embassy in Kabul and in June went searching for a Chechen training camp in Mazar-e Sharif. There, however, she found herself detained by Uzbeks.

Christian Bleuer has described how foreign soldiers, journalists and Afghans officials and military have commonly relayed stories of that most fearsome and incomparably deadly ally of the Taliban, the Chechen fighter. He has also convincingly shown how such stories evaporate like mist in the morning when scrutinised. Bleuer’s dispatches ([here](#) and [here](#)) have made sense of two episodes in my earlier reporting career, as the BBC’s Kabul correspondent (1999-2002).



Diplomatic Chechens

The year 2000 began with me witnessing the almost completely unrecognised Taleban state recognising the completely unrecognised Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, which had claimed independence from Russia in 1991 (following which the first Chechen war had been fought, 1994-1996). The call to go to the Foreign Ministry came on a Friday, 21 January 2000, and I and the rest of the Kabul press corps trooped off to the ministry on our day off and were ushered into one of the state rooms. They were then still grand, if a little faded, and had been decorated with flowers and the flags of Chechnya and the Taleban. Foreign Minister Wakil Ahmad Mutawakel introduced a man he described as the Vice President of Chechnya, Salim Khan (as I wrote it at the time, but actually Zalimkhan) Yandarbiyev, who, according to Bleuer, was actually the breakaway republic's roving envoy to the Muslim world. He had just opened a Chechen embassy in the Afghan capital, we were told. My main memory of Yandarbiyev is of his enormously tall, astrakhan hat.

He told the assembled journalists that only one nation had listened to and understood the Chechen people and that was the Afghans. The 'Chechen mujahedin,' he said, had been heartened by the Afghan recognition of Chechnya, especially because of Afghanistan's famous victory over Soviet forces in the 1980s. Mutawakel responded by saying his government would try to persuade other countries to open diplomatic relations with Chechnya and called on the United Nations and the Organisation of Islamic Conference to put pressure on Russia to negotiate with the breakaway republic. If Moscow refused, he warned, it would have to face the consequences. As to possible Afghan military help, he said the Chechens had no need: they were numerous, experienced and well-armed.

As Bleuer has reported, recent documents show that Yandarbiyev established the Chechen embassy without authorisation or even the knowledge of the official, separatist government in Chechnya (which was itself soon to be in exile). Indeed, his move came at a particularly unwanted time for the separatist government which was then trying to gain diplomatic recognition for their independence from the United States and countries in Europe, an effort hardly helped by publically making friends with the Taleban. Yandarbiyev would remain based in Qatar (where, in 2004, he was [assassinated](#)).

Military Chechens?

Five months later, in May 2000, Russia threatened to bomb military camps it claimed the Chechens had set up in Afghanistan. The first response came from the anti-Taleban Northern Alliance (aka the United Front), led by Ahmad Shah Massud. By this point in Afghanistan's long war, the old enemies, Massud and Moscow, had become allies, brought together by a shared anti-Taleban conviction, and Russia was supplying Massud with arms. Even so, on 31 May 2000, the Northern Alliance warned Moscow against bombing the alleged Chechen camps, saying American attacks on camps belonging to Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan in 1998, following al Qaeda's bombings of US embassies in east Africa, had proved ineffective. The US air attacks, it said, had failed to eliminate foreign militant activity in Taleban-controlled areas of



Afghanistan.

The Taliban, in turn, soon after also condemned the Russian threat, warning Russia it would “burn” if it launched any attack. Indeed, Mutawakel denied the presence of any Chechen camps or, indeed, any Chechens, including diplomats, in the country at all. He did not explain what had happened to the ‘embassy’. As to other foreign nationals, he repeated the Taliban party line, that any Muslim had a right to ‘join the jihad’ in Afghanistan, even though the Taliban did not need their support. He said as well that their governments had the right to discuss their nationals’ return. He accused the ‘international community’ of hypocrisy; having encouraged Muslims to come to Afghanistan to fight the Soviet occupation in the 1980s, it was now condemning those who came to fight in the current ‘jihad.’ However, he also invited foreign observers to check out for themselves if there were Chechen training camps.

So, in June 2000, this author decided to go to Mazar-e Sharif to see what Chechens she might find. She drove north with BBC translator Abdul Sabur Salehzai and the then Reuters bureau chief, Sayed Salahuddin. In those days, it was a day and a half journey from Kabul via Maidan Wardak, Bamyan (then a Taliban garrison town, largely deserted of its civilian population) and Baghlan. (The shorter Salang and Ghorband Valley routes were not passable because of Northern Alliance-held territory in the way.)

We saw no Chechens in Mazar-e Sharif. However, both locals and foreigners working in the aid sector said they had seen Chechens in town. People thought they were based in several places: near Hairaton, the border town at the Amu river (about 45 minutes drive away) and in a village just south of Mazar which used to be populated by Hazaras before the Taliban take-over (my notes do not say which). They also pointed us in the direction of a huge, mud-built fort to the east of the city – Qala-ye Jangi, formerly the headquarters of (now vice president) General Abdul Rashid Dostum and to become famous after the defeat of the Taliban because of the prisoner uprising there in November 2001. We went to the fort, but could not get close enough to see who might be there.

Locals also said Chechens had recently been living in private homes in a district of Mazar called Sayedabad. It had been a Hazara neighbourhood before the Taliban’s recapture of the city in 1998 when they massacred thousands of people, mainly civilians and mainly Hazaras. In 2000, Sayedabad was largely deserted, although there were some Afghan IDPs camping out there. We were pointed in the direction of one block of houses which had razor wire round it and two flags flying – the white flag of the Taliban and, not the green, red and white flag of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, but the black flag of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. Neighbours said the people there the people there were Uzbeks from Uzbekistan.

My Afghan colleagues, Sabur and Salahudin, got out of the car and approached the place, speaking to an armed guard who said he was from Uzbekistan. They were then hauled in and interrogated for five hours. I was ordered to stay in the car where I was also questioned. Our recording and camera equipment was confiscated. We each saw about eight or nine armed men, plus some women and children. The men were clearly not Afghan – they spoke Uzbek and



Russian, and only poor Persian. A man who appeared to be in charge spoke to Sabur and Salahuddin and wore a scarf over his face.

Another senior figure called 'Ustad' (teacher) by the other men, interrogated my colleagues (who reported that he spoke fluent Persian, Russian and Uzbeki, and a little Pashto) and me (in Arabic, with some English). Sabur and Salahuddin both thought he was an Uzbek from Uzbekistan. He hassled me about covering my head properly and criticised Sabur and Salahuddin for working for 'infidel organisations'.

BBC colleague and IMU expert, Hamid Ismaelov, thought our interrogator was probably Odil Usmon, son-in-law of the then IMU deputy leader, Tahir Yuldash, and a noted linguist. Usmon would himself eventually become amir of the IMU in 2009 after both his predecessors were killed in US air strikes, Juma Namangani in the November 2001 bombing and Yuldash in a drone strike in South Waziristan in August 2009. It has just been [confirmed](#) that Usmon himself was killed in November 2015 in Zabul when fighters from the Mansur faction of the Taleban crushed a group of dissident Taleban and their, by that point, Islamic-state aligned IMU [allies](#).

Meanwhile, back in June 2000 in Mazar...

I had a satellite phone with me, fortunately, and managed to speak to the BBC Pashto service. They began to try to raise Taleban ministers in Kandahar to call officials in Mazar to get us released. It was a Friday in summer and it took some time, but eventually we were taken back to our hotel and banned from leaving it. Negotiations between Kandahar and London followed and some very boring and anxious days for us in the hotel, only enlivened by the farcical scene one day of the local Ministry of Foreign Affairs representative insisting I give him my satellite phone and being able to do nothing about it when I refused. How could he physically grapple something from a woman? Eventually, the Taleban gave us permission to return to Kabul.

There, the Taleban Foreign Ministry again denied there were any Chechens in Afghanistan and said the only Uzbeks from Uzbekistan in the country were refugees, not armed fighters. They said they could make no statement on the record concerning the armed men we had encountered until they had finished an investigation – one of the many in Afghanistan, then and now, supposedly launched and never subsequently referred to ever again. I asked Foreign Minister Mutawakel, given that the Uzbeks had detained and questioned Sabur and Salahuddin, what he thought about foreigners having jurisdiction over Afghan citizens on Afghan soil? I never got a convincing answer. However, the threat against Afghan colleagues worked. It was the only time I was threatened into not reporting a story.

Uzbeks, Pakistanis, Arabs, yes... but Chechens?

I did not believe Mutawakel's denial of a Chechen presence because the official Taleban denials that other foreign military camps existed did not add up. It was difficult to get a clear idea at that time about who might be fighting with the Taleban. I occasionally encountered hostile Arabs living in residential neighbourhoods in Kabul, but the frontlines were off-limits to



non-state media. US diplomats in Islamabad made accusations about camps, but refused to share locations, claiming this was classified information. Reports of foreign fighters were largely second-hand. Still, the official denials did not match what I myself had seen. Officially, there were no camps in Mazar. Yet, we had encountered armed men with the IMU flag flying over their compound. When I visited Rishkhor, the old military training academy to the south-west of Kabul also in 2000, locals said there had been Pakistanis and Arabs, along with Taleban, based there until fairly recently. I did not see them, but could read the graffiti calling for the liberation of Kashmir and signs saying welcome in Arabic and Urdu. The camp commander told me it had been written by Afghan recruits who had lived overseas and picked up foreign languages, and were currently “away harvesting.”

The Pakistani, Arab and Uzbek fellow-travellers of the Taleban are now well-attested to. Yet, after reading Bleuer’s account of Chechens being repeatedly reported as present in Afghanistan, but rarely if ever actually encountered, I wonder if Mutawakel had been right. Possibly, the fanfare of the embassy opening in January 2000 had been the full – and only – extent of Chechen presence in Taleban-controlled Afghanistan.