

Ideology along the Contours of Power: The Case of the Caucasus Emirate

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Abstract

The proclamation of the Caucasus Emirate (Imarat Kavkaz, or IK) in October 2007 marked a watershed moment in the evolution of conflict in the North Caucasus, one that changed the ideological rationale for armed resistance. Remarkably little attention, however, has been paid to the substance of that rationale. This article redresses this gap by examining how local leaders sought to shape the meanings of the conflicts that they were engaged in and mobilise people to action. It demonstrates that the IK's leadership articulated a weakly developed political program that often failed to explain what the insurgency was fighting against or seeking to achieve, instead focusing their attention on moulding local identities. In doing so, however, the leadership frequently failed to address practical concerns or overcome existing political boundaries to establish a regional insurgent identity. The article demonstrates the benefits of moving beyond instrumental and doctrinal considerations of ideology and reveals the insights that can be gained by considering important questions of identity.

Keywords: Ideology, identity, North Caucasus, Caucasus Emirate, insurgency

Introduction

In October 2007, rebel leader Dokka Umarov abolished the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria (ChRI), a self-proclaimed state that had fought two wars with Russia. In its place, he established the Caucasus Emirate (Imarat Kavkaz, or IK), an explicitly jihadist, yet largely notional, polity that united insurgents across the entire North Caucasus. This was a watershed moment in the evolution of conflict in the region, one that changed the official rationale for armed resistance and formalised the victory of the insurgency's Islamist wing over nationalist-separatists in its historic Chechen core. Remarkably little attention, however, has been paid to the substance of that rationale. Indeed, the label 'jihadist' has obscured as much as it has illuminated, creating the illusion of an ideology that is fully and easily understood. How the movement's ideology varied geographically and over time – from its emergence to its ultimate decline in 2015, when the IK collapsed under the combined pressures of sustained counterinsurgency operations and large-scale defections to the Islamic State (IS) — remains largely unexplored.

This article moves towards filling this gap by asking how the IK's regional leaders sought to shape the interpretations and meanings of the conflicts they were involved in. It asks how, through this meaning construction, they sought to mobilise people behind their cause, and what insights these efforts offer for our understanding of the insurgency. In order to achieve this, it examines what leaders claimed to be fighting for and against, how they justified their violence, and the rationale they articulated for engaging in armed struggle. It demonstrates that the IK's political program was underdeveloped, with leaders often failing to offer detailed assessments of the status quo or clear visions of what they were seeking to achieve. Instead, they focused on justifying their methods and shaping identities around the conflict. In doing so, however, they failed to address practical concerns regarding mobilisation or to overcome existing political boundaries to establish a trans-regional insurgent identity.

The article is structured as follows. First, it explains the author's conceptualisation of ideology, and its relevance to understanding political violence. Then, it introduces Social Movement Theory's concept of framing as a means to examine ideology in a methodologically robust manner. In the third section, a brief overview of the evolution of the North Caucasus insurgency, from a nationalist-separatist conflict in Chechnya to a regional

Islamist insurgency is provided. In the next section, framing theory is applied to a unique corpus of insurgent leadership statements. The discussion then turns to examining the ideology of the IK's regional leadership, exploring in turn the problems and solutions that leaders identified, differences in their attitudes towards the use of violence, and the distinct identities around the conflict that they evoked. Overall, it is argued that the IK was a weakly integrated and ideologically shallow movement that failed to address pragmatic concerns. This article demonstrates the importance of moving beyond questions of strategy and doctrine in considering ideology and suggest a greater focus on questions of 'how' and 'who' rather than 'whither' — especially in the case of non-intellectual movements like the Caucasus Emirate.

Ideology and Action

This article adopts an interpretivist approach to ideology. Differences in beliefs and interpretations of events and experiences can affect behaviour, and consequently also whether and how people mobilise in response to these.[1] Mobilisation for political violence is not an automatic response to characteristics and conditions, but instead requires that actors come to see a situation as problematic, and violence as offering a potential solution. No less important, it requires that actors construct for themselves and for their opponents identities that can form the basis for mobilisation.[2] If we accept that beliefs and interpretations matter, however, we must also consider the myriad forces that help shape them. Ideologies, which at their most basic level are “semantic systems for coding reality”, constitute one such force.[3] This is not to attribute to them some kind of causal power, but rather to see them as a tool available to actors in the process of meaning construction. By studying ideology, we can better understand how violent political actors endeavour to shape interpretations of the conflicts they are involved in, and, through this, mobilise people behind their cause.

This, of course, still leaves us the challenge of determining what constitutes an ideology. How one conceptualises the term is of critical importance to how one understands its role, the data and methods that one can use, and the conclusions that one can draw. Exploring the plethora of approaches and understandings that exist, falls outside the scope of this article.[4] Nevertheless, it is important to clarify the understanding that informs this discussion. Ideologies can be seen as sharing a number of common attributes. First, they establish a group's distinct identity, the challenges it faces, and its aims and objectives in meeting those challenges.[5] More broadly, they establish the “ethical, moral, and normative principles that guide personal and collective action.”[6] This article consequently defines ideology as,

“A set of interconnected beliefs and attitudes, shared and used by members of a group or population, that relate to problematic aspects of social and political topics. These beliefs have an explicit evaluative and implicit behavioral component.”[7]

In other words, ideologies set out a vision of the way the world is, how it should be, and how adherents should behave to bridge the divide between the two. Importantly, this definition does not impose any conditions of complexity. Too often, ideology is treated as a substitute for an intellectual edifice, and consequently viewed as something doctrinal, rooted in a core body of texts.[8] A lack of intellectual coherence or sophistication or ignorance of those texts is then used to support claims that actors are not ideological. In reality, ideologies can operate on a spectrum of complexity and coherence.[9] Focusing only on the intellectual end of the spectrum leads to a significant number of violent actors being declared non-ideological, thereby missing an important part of the interpretive process.

Understanding Ideology Through Framing

Discussions of ideology often remain at the theoretical level, supplemented by selected empirical examples. One of the challenges facing the study of ideology is to develop robust methodologies that can allow us to systematically interrogate ideology in practice. In order to meet this challenge, the author draws on Social Movement Theory's concept of framing, and in particular on the work of Holbrook applying this theory to Al-

Qaeda (AQ) leadership statements.[10] Framing theory seeks to address the challenge that,

“Meaning is problematic; it does not spring from the object of attention into the actor’s head, because objects have no intrinsic meaning. Rather, meaning is negotiated, contested, modified, articulated and rearticulated.”[11]

Collective Action Frames are a specific category of frames that are action-oriented and seek to inspire and legitimise activities.[12] Among these, diagnostic framing provides the starting point for action by identifying what needs to be changed in a given situation and, just as importantly, who is to blame for it.[13] Prognostic framing involves articulating a solution to diagnosed problems, both in terms of establishing goals and the means for achieving them.[14] Finally, motivational framing addresses that most challenging of tasks: the efforts to transform spectators into active participants.[15]

Framing and ideology are not identical, despite the frequent blurring of boundaries between the two. Both shape interpretations of the world and have clear communicative dimensions. However, competing, even opposed, ideologies can use the same frame, movements may deploy certain frames as part of an effort to conceal aspects of their ideology, and not all frames are of an ideological nature.[16][17] Ideologies arguably need to demonstrate a complexity and degree of temporal consistency that is not required of framing. Moreover, by treating ideology and framing as synonymous, “we no longer have a vocabulary for distinguishing between the complex set of ideas and its invocation in a particular instance.”[18] Nevertheless, frames can originate from and influence ideologies, and framing theory provides us with a rigorous set of tools for assessing the articulation of ideology through a consideration of ideological frames.[19] The decision to focus on specifically ideological frames invariably leads to a blurring of the boundaries between the two concepts, but it should not be read as an effort to collapse the conceptual boundaries between them.

From Nationalism to Jihad: The Road to the Caucasus Emirate (IK)

The contemporary North Caucasus insurgency has its origins in the two Chechen wars (1994-1996 and 1999-2002). Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, conflict between a re-emerging Russia and an independence-seeking Chechen Republic of Ichkeria (ChRI) led to war.[20] The ChRI emerged victorious, but its victory was largely pyrrhic, leaving it to face a battery of social, economic, and political problems, including a proliferation of paramilitary groups.[21] Amid widespread instability and criminality in Chechnya on the one hand, and renewed determination from Russia under the leadership of Vladimir Putin on the other, Russia renewed the war.[22] Over time, Russia drove the Chechen rebels out of the cities and installed its own leadership in the republic.[23] The conflict, meanwhile, increasingly spread beyond Chechnya’s boundaries to its neighbouring republics, as a result of both a deliberate rebel strategy and the preferences of local actors.[24]

In ideological terms, the first war is widely regarded as a nationalist-separatist conflict, with Islam playing only a secondary, instrumental role.[25] War, however, accelerated and distorted region-wide processes of Islamic revival.[26] Within the separatist movement, a loose Islamic camp formed and — bolstered by ‘foreign fighters’ and ideologists who migrated to the republic from 1993 onwards — rose to prominence in the inter-war period.[27] This camp repeatedly challenged Chechen leaders for control of the entire insurgency and had a significant impact on its ideological orientation.[28] Regionalisation, too, played an important role in ideological change, as local actors in the neighbouring republics introduced their own preferences.[29] The dual processes of regionalisation and Islamisation culminated first in the proclamation of a Caucasus Front in May 2005, and then in the establishment of the IK two years later.

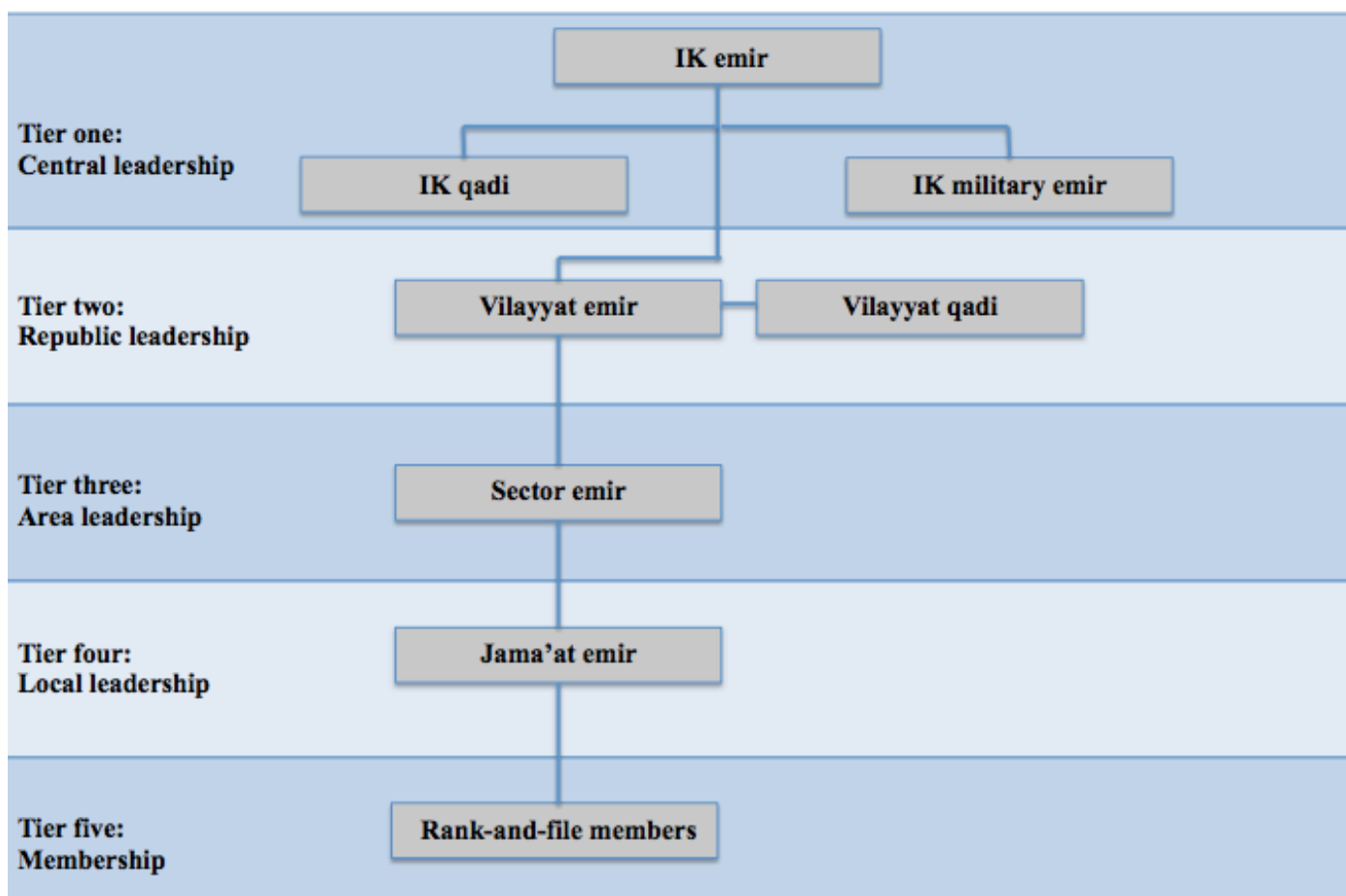
In comparison to this earlier evolution, the insurgency’s ideology under the banner of the IK has been largely neglected. Root cause, rather than ideological, explanations have dominated, and ideology has often been treated contextually rather than as the primary focus of study.[30] Indeed, it is not uncommon to encounter assertions about ideology that make no or negligible reference to insurgent-produced materials.[31] Where ideology

has been given more serious consideration, attention has focused mainly on the insurgency’s relationship with the ‘global jihadist movement,’ with authors observing rhetorical alignment and a convergence of goals between the IK and global actors such as AQ.[32] While offering important insights, such approaches have tended to overemphasise commonalities — ignoring, for example, that goals are frequently “vague, similar and utopian” and can be used to justify highly divergent strategies.[33] Key differences and nuances among actors, particularly at the regional level, have received limited attention.

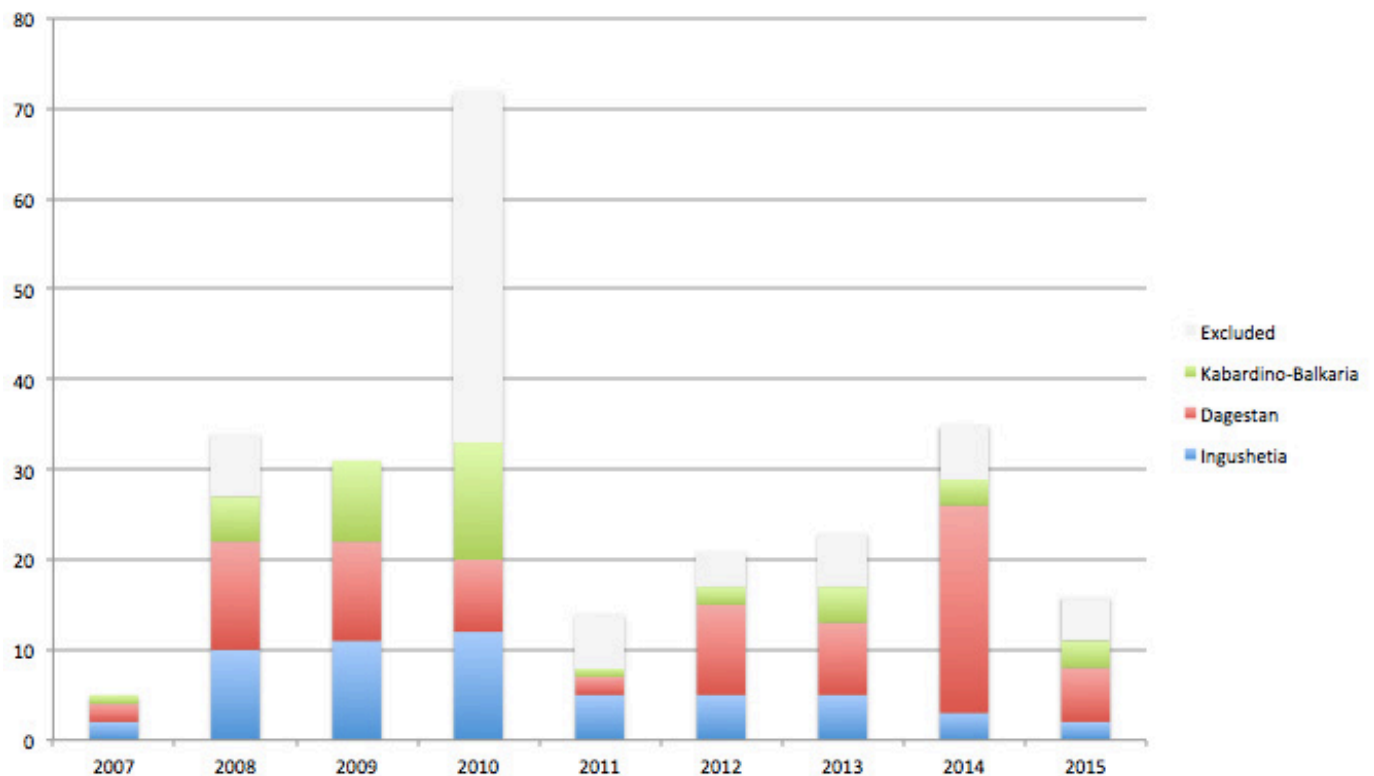
Applying Framing to IK Regional Leadership Statements

The following discussion partially redresses this neglect by examining the ideology articulated by the IK’s leadership in Kabardino-Balkaria, Ingushetia, and Dagestan.[34] From a unique and extensive corpus of insurgency-produced material compiled over the course of many years, the author selected statements issued in the name of the emir and *qadi* (Shari’ah judge) of each republic, as well as the top-level sector (Northern, Southern, Central, and Mountain) commanders in Dagestan to account for the larger size of the insurgency there.

Figure 1: Simplified IK Organizational Chart



To these were added statements by Aleksandr Tikhomirov (Said Buryatskiy), a key ideologist who spent much of his time with the Ingushetian branch of the insurgency but did not occupy a formal position, as well as website statements issued in the name of the republics’ general leaderships. In total, this amounted to 41 identifiable actors across the lifespan of the IK, and 178 leadership statements. The majority of the statements were in Russian.

Figure 2: Number of Communiqués by Republic and Year

Building on a coding schema developed by Holbrook, the author developed a granular schema to capture ideology-related frames and applied it to the corpus of statements, coding at the sentence level.[35] Diagnostic codes captured characterisations of the way the world is, focusing on the identification of shortcomings with the status quo and the specific grievances that leaders articulated. For prognostic framing, the author coded for different aspects of the way the world should be, including long-term goals; and how people should behave to bridge the divide between these worlds, including the specific tactics that were endorsed. Finally, to reflect attempts to motivate a response, the author coded for the identification of specific audiences; references to obligations, potential rewards, and practical considerations; and how leaders sought to define ‘in,’ ‘out,’ and intermediary groups. The full coding schema can be found in the Appendix.

The result is not a comprehensive picture of Caucasian jihadism. There is considerable ‘legacy’ material from earlier phases of the conflict, and from actors who did not occupy a formal position in the IK; these cannot be considered here. Caucasian jihadism also clearly existed within a broader jihadist milieu, but in the space available here it is not possible to evaluate the role of non-Caucasian ideologues in the ideological trajectory of the IK. Instead, the aim is more modest: To identify the main features of the ‘official’ ideology of the movement at the regional level, and thereby understand how regional leaders sought to shape the meanings of the conflicts in their republics. The regional leaders acted as formal representatives of the movement and thus enjoyed a privileged position in the ideological ecosystem of the movement that warrants separate consideration. In evaluating the particularities of jihadism in specific contexts, moreover, there is clear merit in considering how ideas from elsewhere are translated and transformed for local audiences, whereby local leaders are one conduit for such processes.

From Here to Where? The Weakness of the IK’s Political Program

On the surface, the IK’s leadership offered a clear diagnosis and prognosis that explained what they were fighting against and aiming to achieve. Umarov’s decision to proclaim the IK involved recasting regional armed

struggle as part of a transnational fight against the infidel, with the ultimate goal of establishing a Shari'ah-governed state in the North Caucasus.[36] The regional leadership clearly replicated this broad framing strategy, signalling their adherence to the ideological framework established by Umarov. Whether one compares leaders in Kabardino-Balkaria, Ingushetia or Dagestan; contrasts the IK's founding and last generation of leaders; or focuses on statements issued by specific leaders or those propagated by websites in the name of a general leadership – the definition of problem and solution were consistent. The IK rejected the rule of 'infidel' Russia and its 'local puppets,' and it advocated their replacement with Shari'ah governance. The same broad framing of the conflict can be found on the IK's websites.[37]

Scratch beneath the surface, however, and one finds remarkably little of substance. In Kabardino-Balkaria, Anzor Astemirov – an influential Islamic leader before joining the insurgency, and one of the architects of the IK – offered a comprehensive diagnosis that fully rejected the existing political system.[38] He portrayed democratic systems and values as incompatible with the core tenets of Islam, and he argued that inequality was inherent to “barbaric capitalist laws” that were in any case worthless in a judicial system as corrupt as Russia's.[39][40] Astemirov's critique of the existing political system moved between its inherent features and its practical manifestation to argue that nothing less than its total replacement was necessary. Yet Astemirov was alone among the regional leadership in articulating such a complex diagnosis. In Dagestan and Ingushetia, leaders in the early years offered at best a mid-range critique of social mores. They catalogued various social problems and vices — the availability of drugs and alcohol, prostitution, police impunity, corruption and so on — that would supposedly overcome the 'infidel' state.[41] The implication was that these problems were inherent to the system. Absent from such diagnoses, however, was any explication of underlying structural and systemic problems. Leaders focused on manifestations, practices, and behaviours, but did not translate these into political problems requiring political solutions. The IK, after all, was not merely seeking to change certain practices, but was demanding the revolutionary replacement of the entire social and political system. Yet, for the most part, its leaders failed to undertake the clarificatory work that explained why this revolution was actually necessary in the region.

The diagnostic framing that leaders deployed was instead heavily oriented towards grievance narratives. This framing displayed two distinct features. First, grievances were highly localised. Although leaders drew on broader jihadist ideas of infidels waging a war against Islam, they focused on grievances within their own republics. With the exception of Tikhomirov — an outsider who devoted as much attention to Chechnya as Ingushetia — it was rare for leaders in one republic to reference events, grievances, or even individuals in another. Even Astemirov, who claimed a regional role, achieved a broader perspective through abstraction — addressing the situation facing Muslims generally — rather than talking about specifics elsewhere. Second, grievance narratives were missing from a large number of statements and became less prominent over time. When Putin returned to the Russian presidency in 2012, the authorities replaced 'soft' policies oriented towards addressing the socio-economic drivers of conflict with hard-line measures designed to secure the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi.[42] The increased repression that accompanied this change, however, was not reflected in local rebel leaders' statements. Rustam Asilderov, the long-serving (2012-2017) leader of the Dagestani insurgency, focused almost exclusively on issues affecting the insurgents themselves, while other leaders made only passing references to grievances.[43][44] Only Magomed Suleymanov, Dagestani *qadi* and Mountain Sector emir (and later IK leader) persisted in identifying grievances.[45] If injustice “puts fire in the belly and iron in the soul,” then insurgent leaders offered significantly less fire and iron than one might expect, and less and less as time progressed.[46]

Detailed examination of the prognostic framing strategy employed by leaders, and what they meant when they spoke of a Shari'ah-governed state, is similarly unrevealing. The numerous statements of Jama'at Shari'at, the banner under which Dagestani rebels operated until mid-2010, offered no substantive explanation of what Shari'ah law meant in practice or what its future state would look like. They spoke of fighting “until the black flag with *la ilaha illa'llah* [the *shahada*, or Islamic profession of faith] is raised above the *gossovet* [parliament building],” but offered few clues as to what would happen inside the building.[47] Kurbanov found a similar

shallowness of debate in his exploration of the *jamaatshariat.com* website, which was closely linked to the evolution of the group.[48] Again, it is only in Astemirov's statements that we find details on how he understood Shari'ah. Here, he was able to draw on his own pre-insurgency experience of adjudicating disputes within the Kabardino-Balkarian Jama'at.[49] He claimed, for example, that a Shari'ah court could find a solution to the contentious issue of land reform — the third rail of Kabardino-Balkarian politics. While he declined to explain this solution on the grounds that it could not be implemented in conditions of "occupation", his vagueness was no different to any opposition leader who lambasts corruption without specifying a plan to eliminate it.[50] For the remainder of the leadership, Shari'ah was a trope, a blank canvas onto which people could project their own ideas of justice. At times it functioned as a destination, something the insurgency was striving for; at others, as an existing reality that needed to be defended from the infidel. This ambiguity in many ways reflected the nature of the IK itself: A 'state' that both existed and yet made no pretence of exercising any state functions. Yet it testified to the shallowness of the IK's political program. On a doctrinal level, the group's ideology, as manifested through its regional leaders' diagnostic and prognostic framing, resembled a Potemkin village, a pastiche of jihadist ideas that lacked substantive development in relation to the circumstances to which it was to be applied.

Ways and Means: Justifying Violence and Addressing Practical Concerns

Prognostic framing is not restricted purely to the articulation of goals; it also encompasses the means by which such goals should be achieved. Analysis of such framing can, in turn, help us capture an important component of any ideology: *how* one moves from the undesirable present to the sought-after future. For insurgent movements, part of this bridging strategy relates to how leaders justify the use of violence, and whom they direct that violence against. Indeed, questions of targeting are often central to assessments of the ideology of insurgent actors in general, and jihadist ones in particular.

In considering the statements of the IK leadership, one can see a clear distinction between violence as theory and violence as practice. As an abstraction, there was considerable agreement among the leadership. Leaders made recourse to two interlinked framing strategies. First, and most obviously, they consistently leveraged the concept of jihad to portray their struggle as just. However, it is noteworthy that only Astemirov and Tikhomirov addressed in detail the applicability of defensive jihad to the North Caucasus.[51] The remainder of the leadership, most of whom were not theologically trained, simply took this applicability for granted. This left a gap in leadership explanations that could not be filled by reproduction of translated jihadist literature from elsewhere: it left space for accepting the broader legitimacy of jihad while disputing its application to the North Caucasus - an argument proffered by various actors in the history of the North Caucasus insurgency. Equally importantly, when conflict in Syria and Iraq arose, it meant that local insurgent leaders failed to make the theological case as to why the local insurgency should be prioritised over jihad elsewhere. Although these debates could be found elsewhere online, if one accepts that the official leaders were privileged voices within the insurgency, their inability to articulate a clear argument on this matter represented a significant omission. Second, as an abstraction, leaders portrayed violence as the only option: The state had transgressed acceptable boundaries, necessitating a response in kind. Virtually no consideration was given to alternatives. If movements typically choose from a menu of forms of contention and non-contention, then the IK's offering consisted of one item — violence — with the only choice being the size of the portion.[52] The greatest restraint was to be found in Kabardino-Balkaria, where Astemirov espoused a preference for persuasion over violence and Zalim Shebzukhov, the last leader, advanced his own interpretation of spiritual jihad.[53] A degree of restraint was also evident in Ingushetia, where the leadership distanced itself from threats to local businesses on the grounds that it was necessary to conduct *da'wa* (proselytising) first.[54] In Dagestan, alternatives were mostly considered only in so far as they supported violence, e.g. in the form of financial donations and material support. The three cases operated on a spectrum with regards to their attitudes to violence in the abstract, but across them scant attention was paid to non-violent forms of contention. Indeed, when the issue arose — during protests in Ingushetia or when an interviewer asked Jama'at Shari'at about engaging in political versus armed struggle — leaders explicitly rejected them.[55]

In framing actual violence, there were clear differences in attitudes, particularly in the IK's early years. In Kabardino-Balkaria, Astemirov and his successor, Asker Dzhappuyev, both dedicated considerable efforts to explaining individual attacks, demonstrating concern for civilian casualties and avoiding escalation, and differentiating between local and federal authorities and security service personnel. In doing so, they evidently sought to appeal to, and avoid alienating, local communities. In Dagestan, Jama'at Shari'at represented the polar opposite. Descriptions of violence were gratuitous, concern for civilians was mostly lacking, and there was no dividing line between opponents who had local roots and those that did not. The Ingushetian leadership occupied something of a middle ground, with concern for civilians coupled with disappearing boundaries between local and federal enemies. Over time, however, the differences became less distinct. After the deaths of Astemirov and Dzhappuyev, the Kabardino-Balkarian leadership devoted less time to justifying specific acts; after the demise of Jama'at Shari'at, Dagestani leadership statements became less bloodthirsty. Across the insurgency, violence became more and more abstract.

The rhetorical targets of violence, however, remained persistently local, and regional leaders demonstrated only negligible interest in the world beyond their own republics. Astemirov, a rare exception, employed the same hierarchy as Umarov – with Russia the main enemy and the local authorities playing a subordinate role – and was explicit that the West was not the insurgency's concern.[56][57] The remainder of the Kabardino-Balkarian leadership and leaders in Dagestan and Ingushetia, by contrast, focused almost exclusively on local targets: people associated with the authorities or undesirable social practices, or those accused of slandering or informing on the insurgency. Even as the insurgency itself moved closer to global actors and factions like AQ and IS, this was not accompanied by the identification of new enemies or priorities. Indeed, a notable feature of the statements of those who defected to IS was a lack of explanation for their decision.[58]

Although this article focuses on the content of the IK's ideology, rather than its receipt or impact, it is worth briefly considering the motivational question of efficacy. The literature on social movements clearly shows that it is insufficient to persuade people that your diagnosis and plan of action are meritorious — they also need to be convinced that the plans are practical.[59] Awareness of this represented a key difference between early and later IK leaders. One of the main themes of Tikhomirov's statements, for example, was providing a rationale for action. Like Astemirov, he rejected the idea that defensive jihad required strength, instead insisting that the insurgency's very weakness rendered jihad mandatory.[60] He spoke extensively about his own doubts about joining, and how they had turned out to be misplaced. Later IK leaders, by contrast, consistently failed to address practical concerns. This argumentative failure is relevant when considering the IK's mobilisation problems in its later years. The Syrian conflict demonstrated that a constituency sympathetic to jihadist ideas existed, but these people did not respond to calls for action in the North Caucasus.[61] A key difference between North Caucasus- and Syria-based appeals lay not so much in the visions they offered — for IS in Syria and in the North Caucasus, these were identical — as in the contrasting perceptions of the conflicts themselves. Particularly in the early years, IS' claims to be winning were promoted not only by jihadists, but by sensationalist mainstream media coverage. In the North Caucasus, by contrast, there was a widespread perception, acknowledged even by the IK leadership, that the insurgency had reached a dead end. The lack of effort by later IK leaders to address pragmatic concerns over the viability of jihad in the region consequently appears to represent a significant failing.

Incompatible Identities: Constructing the 'Self' and 'Other'

The IK's lack of a political program and failure to articulate a pragmatic plan for achieving its goals could leave the impression that the IK was not ideological in nature. This, however, is to miss the forest for the trees, and highlights the need to look beyond instrumental and doctrinal understandings of ideology. Of particular importance is how the IK's regional leaders framed identity, which represented the most developed and consistent component of the collected leadership statements. At the most basic level, leaders left little doubt that

they conceived of this identity as Islamic. The ubiquity of Islamic reference points — standard Islamic phrasing, quotes from the Qur'an and hadith, greetings on Islamic holidays, the deployment of visual symbology such as flags emblazoned with the *shahada* — can easily render us numb to their significance. Yet there is nothing inevitable about such references, and their universality and centrality serve to establish the actors as Islamic ones. In other words, since religion itself can be regarded as an ideology according to the definition used in this article, they cue the audience to the movement's broad ideological orientation.

They also provide the foundation for more specific motivational framing strategies around identity. In constructing an identity for themselves and their opponents, insurgent leaders fully embraced the Manichean dualism inherent to jihadism. On the one side of the barrier were mujahideen; on the other, infidels, hypocrites, and apostates. Leaders consistently portrayed the boundary between Muslims and non-Muslims as absolute and non-negotiable. In the words of Tikhomirov, “the hatred between Muslims and infidels is an integral part of this religion.”[62] Notably absent from statements were recognition of the possibility of peaceful co-existence and stories of relationships or positive interactions crossing the divide.

Leaders reinforced this basic dualism by developing the themes of virtue and vice, often at the level of the individual. In doing so, they sought to encourage people to distance themselves from the ‘other’ and instead live up to the standards of ‘true believers’ — embodied, of course, by the mujahideen. Leaders repeatedly emphasised the valour, selflessness, and, of course, the religiosity of the insurgents. This almost attained the level of art in the statements of Tikhomirov, who constructed highly personalised narratives that emphasised the egalitarianism and fraternity of the mujahideen community.[63] The insurgency's opponents, by contrast, were routinely portrayed as malevolent, dishonourable, and devoid of redeeming features — all the more so the higher one went up the chain of command. The Ingushetian leadership, for example, recounted stories of how members of the security services failed to come to the aid of attacked colleagues or fled from the scene of insurgent attacks.[64] The contrast between those who are “the most zealous on Allah's path” and the “drunken occupiers and their murtad concubines” could not have been starker.[65] Leaders portrayed identity boundaries as absolute, and the necessity of choosing which side of the line to position oneself as unavoidable. Yet this Manichean depiction of self and other, the focus on the antagonistic relationship between the two, tells only part of the story. Between the republics, there were distinct differences in framing the ‘self,’ particularly with regard to accommodating ethnic identities. In Kabardino-Balkaria, leaders argued for the primacy of a common religious identity over Kabardin/Circassian versus Balkar differences. Astemirov, for example, criticised nationalist celebrations, claiming love for one's native tongue and people should not be placed on a par with religion or state ideology.[66] Islam served as a way of deemphasising ethnic boundaries by subordinating them to a Muslim one. In Ingushetia, particularly during the tenure of Dzhamaley Mutaliyev (mid-2010 to mid-2013), significantly more emphasis was placed on ethnicity. However, since the main dispute was with the “infidel” Ossetians, this could nevertheless be accommodated within a religious framing of the conflict. In both cases, the articulated identity was essentially Muslim first, ethnic affiliation second. In Dagestan, by contrast, leaders sought to overcome ethnic divisions by emphasising a Dagestani identity that was inherently Muslim. This aimed at the same goal: prioritising religious over ethnic identity, by arguing that people were Dagestani first and Avar, Lezgin, and so forth second. The consequence, however, of emphasising Dagestani identity was that it limited the salience of Dagestani leadership statements to non-Dagestani audiences, running counter to efforts to establish a region-wide movement identity. This is significant in a broader movement context, where over time both the communicative output and operational activities of the Kabardino-Balkarian and Ingushetian branches declines, creating a greater reliance on the Dagestani sector to sustain the IK.

One can also find differences between the republics in the construction of the other. Astemirov, for example, spoke of “Russian *giaors* [infidels] and local traitors,” “Russian occupiers and their local accomplices,” and “Russian masters, local maniacs.”[67] Whatever their features, these two categories were never collapsed into a singular identity, and the stories of treachery on the part of the infidel sought to emphasise this internal divide. There was, moreover, a willingness to contemplate the possibility of crossing boundaries, of the local ‘them’ becoming ‘us’ if these local actors would only repent. Dzhamaleyev similarly sought to maintain the distinction

between the Russian infidel and their local supporters, albeit in circumstances of escalating violence.[68] In Dagestan, by contrast, Jama'at Shari'at's condemnation of local pro-Russian actors was absolute, and refused to recognise either an intermediary position or the possibility of movement from 'them' to 'us.'

Conclusion: Ideology along the Contours of Power

This article has identified some of the key features of the IK's ideology, as evidenced by the ideology-related framing strategies employed by its regional leadership. It has examined how rebel leaders sought to shape the interpretations and meanings of the conflicts they were involved in, exploring the problems, goals, strategies, and identities that they advanced. Two features of this ideology emerge as particularly noteworthy. First, the IK's political program was weakly developed. Rebel leaders typically failed to offer a detailed diagnosis of what it was they were fighting against, and to translate complaints about particular behaviours and practices into a detailed systemic critique. Nor did the majority of them offer much by way of details of what the Shari'ah-governed polity they aimed to bring into existence would actually look like. They devoted more time to justifying their use of violence as a means of achieving these weakly articulated goals, but even here there was an increasing failure to attempt to persuade audiences that insurgent action was efficacious.

These failures of explanation and persuasion need to be placed in the political context of the North Caucasus. When we do this, they become less stark: Republican authorities frequently introduce policies without explanation, and there is often little vibrant public debate over problems and potential solutions. The IK was not so much competing in the marketplace of idea as aspiring to replace one monopoly of political thought with another. Tripp contends that resistance often follows "the contours of power," and there is strong support for this in the IK's articulated ideology of resistance.[69] All too often, rebel leaders did not seek to persuade so much as order, instruct, or admonish - much like the North Caucasian authorities. The opposing parties in the conflict therefore had much more in common with one another than either would care to admit.

Further support for Tripp's assertion comes from the second feature of the ideology: The IK's leadership relied heavily on identity to sustain its calls for mobilisation, but ultimately failed to create a unified one that transcended existing political boundaries. The IK tried to portray itself as part of a global jihadist movement that rejected Russian statehood, and in doing so it drew on both ethnic identities that sometimes crossed state boundaries and a supposedly transnational Muslim identity. At the same time, the IK patently failed to break free of the political system that produced it. It would perhaps be unfair — given the degree to which the imagined unity of this community is taken for granted in both scholarly and public debate — to point out that the very idea of the 'Muslim world' is a colonial construct having very little in common with the Qur'anic notion of the *umma*. [70] However, IK leaders showed themselves to be fully embedded within the Russian political realities they so fervently rejected. The problems they identified, the actors they rhetorically engaged with, and key components of the layered identities they evoked rarely crossed the boundaries of specific republics. The IK's leaders failed to construct an ideology that transcended intra-state, much less international, political boundaries.

Overall, this article demonstrates the importance of moving beyond instrumental considerations of strategy and doctrine in assessing the ideology of insurgent groups. In the case of the IK, these offer only limited insights. By focusing exclusively on them, one runs the risk of missing the broader role that ideology can play in shaping interpretations and meanings of conflict. By contrast, considering questions of 'how' and 'who,' and moving beyond superficial, top-level assessments to consider how these might vary within movements opens up avenues for insights into how leaders seek to mobilise people for conflict. The limitations found within IK leaders' statements reveal a degree of ideological weakness that encourages further consideration of its relationship to the movement's ultimate demise. Ideological shortcomings were not necessary a primary determinant of that decline – here, broader consideration of the security environment in which the movement operated is vital. Yet it is surely significant that the insurgency's leadership failed to offer anything resembling a complex justification for its claimed state and strategy that was capable of convincing in theory, much less in practice.

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Appendix: Coding Schema

Diagnostic Frames

Socio-cultural and normative issues	
	The undesirability of existing societies <i>References to how features of existing societies, such as man-made laws, democracy, etc., need to be replaced; criticisms of the current system</i>
Grievance narratives	
	Past events <i>References to specific events in the past highlighted as problematic, such as the Stalin-era deportations or the Chechen wars.</i>
	On-going events <i>References to on-going problems or causes of dissatisfaction, such as the mistreatment of Muslims</i>

Prognostic Frames

Strategic/political vision	
	Lauded past/existing societies <i>References to past or existing societies that serve as models for emulation, or to their absence.</i>
	Desired way forward and end result <i>Specific policies that should be implemented in society, such as prohibiting the sale of alcohol, closing gambling halls. References to a desired end state, e.g. an independent state governed by their version of Shari'ah law, or to general goals.</i>
	References to ideological systems <i>References to specific widely recognized systems of belief, such as communism or nationalism.</i>
	Debates over the proclamation of the IK <i>Explanations of and references to why the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria (ChRI) was abolished and replaced with the Caucasus Emirate (IK). Efforts to demonstrate the legitimacy of the IK</i>
Tactics and violence	
	Importance of violence <i>References to the importance of insurgent activity and waging "jihad." References to and justification of specific attacks, the use of specific tactics, personal paths to violence.</i>
	Political tools outside violence <i>Advocacy and praise for alternatives to the use of violence and armed resistance, including proving support</i>
	Constraints on the use of violence <i>Explanations for when and why violence should not be used in certain circumstances</i>
	Legitimacy of targeting non-combatants <i>Justifications for carrying out attacks on civilians.</i>
Direction/scope of solutions	
	Declared enemies <i>Designation of other actors as enemies. Identification of actors as targets of action. Specific threats.</i>
	Declared friends/allies <i>References to individuals or groups who are either explicitly identified as friends or allies, or who are praised for their support and policies.</i>

Motivational Frames

Message direction/audiences	
	Declared audiences <i>Explicitly identified audiences for a communiqué.</i>
Identity	
	Who are 'we' <i>Efforts to define the boundaries of the in-group, who 'we' are, what unites 'us,' and what characteristics 'we' have in common; references to cultural heritage and culturally bound concepts of honor.</i>
	Who are 'they' <i>Efforts to define the boundaries of the out-group, who 'they' are, what unites 'them,' and what characteristics 'they' have in common.</i>
	Who is in the middle <i>Efforts to define the boundaries of a group situated between 'them' and 'us'; portrayals of the group as needing to choose; references to why the group is not part of the 'us.'</i>
	Stories of boundaries between groups <i>References to events and behaviours that reinforce or weaken the boundaries between in-, out- and intermediary groups; references to social relations crossing boundaries.</i>
Obligations and incentives	
	Obligations <i>References to why people are obliged to act; references to fard al-kifaya (a religious duty incumbent on the community of believers) and fard al-ayn (a religious duty incumbent on every Muslim).</i>
	Rewards <i>References to the benefits that will accrue to those who act; eulogization of martyrs and references to the rewards that await them in the afterlife.</i>
Efficacy of action	
	Support and strength <i>References to public support for the insurgency or its absence; references to the relationship between support and the importance of action.</i>
	Trust <i>References to trust or the lack of it and how this affects mobilization and operation within the insurgency.</i>