From Afghanistan To Ingushetia

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Recently, I have been receiving many calls from journalists who want me to discuss what lessons, if any, the United States can learn from the Soviet experience in Afghanistan. It troubles me, however, that I am being asked time and again about the same technical details: is it possible to find bin Laden with tips from local informers; what kind of bombs might be used to penetrate caves; or about the hiking boots required in Afghanistan, where the special troops would be fighting literally on equal footing with their foes.

The journalists listen more or less patiently—and invariably cut from their articles—my seemingly irrelevant observations about General Ruslan Aushev, who is arguably the most distinguished Soviet war hero in Afghanistan and himself a Muslim from Russia's North Caucasus. Now, however, Aushev's experience in and especially after Afghanistan seems strikingly relevant. If we are to defeat Al Qaeda permanently then we must seriously consider the example of this Soviet Muslim soldier who learned in Afghanistan to fight the disaster of all-out war.

In the early 1990s, after defeat in Afghanistan and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, General Aushev was elected president of his native Ingushetia, one of the ethnic republics within the Russian Federation. Ingushetia is a tiny mountainous place—smaller than Delaware—stretched in a narrow strip along the frontier of the rebellious Chechnya. You have heard about Chechnya, but it is less likely that you are familiar with Ingushetia. This is because Aushev has been successful in preserving peace in Ingushetia, in marked contrast to neighboring Chechnya. Peace in distant regions rarely makes it into the headlines.

Yet Ingushetia deserves global attention exactly because it is peaceful. It provides a rare example of successful resistance to Al Qaeda in Muslim areas. Moreover, Ingushetia's resistance is successful apparently because it is being waged with the expressed approval of its population and without the dirty methods that professionals of espionage portray as a necessary evil. No death squads, no torture chambers, no reliance on traitors and double agents euphemistically called HumInt, human intelligence. For Aushev this might be a moral and professional choice, he is a combat officer after all. It is also part and parcel of a security strategy that seems to work.

Since 1996 Aushev has been loudly warning that young men from all over Russia's North Caucasus were traveling to the Islamic "summer camps" in the Middle East and then turning up in Chechnya. But Russian Federal authorities were barely listening. The inner circle around Boris Yeltsin was too preoccupied at the time with their own political

survival. Besides, in Moscow, Aushev was privately regarded as a "semi-separatist" and considered too friendly with his Chechen neighbors. Indeed from the beginning of the first war in Chechnya in 1994, Aushev openly dissented from Russia's official policy of all-out war. Drawing parallels with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Aushev recommended that Chechen president Dudayev, and later Aslan Maskhadov, be treated with tact and with patience. The political conflict over the distribution of federal powers between Moscow and Chechnya was soon overshadowed by the common threat of foreign-inspired terrorist militancy. In this Aushev saw the promise of cooperation.

Shortly after the beginning of the Chechen war, volunteers from Arab states, including many veterans of the Afghan war, arrived in the Caucasus with money, the ideology of jihad, and terrorist tactics. These volunteers themselves rarely fought. Rather, they preferred to convert the local youths to their militant brand of Islam, one that was radically at odds with Chechen Islamic traditions. The splendidly equipped and religiously inspired battalions of young Chechen men soon became a very assertive internal force challenging Chechnya's secular nationalists. The internal opposition to Chechen president Aslan Maskhadov proudly displayed their ties to Afghanistan's Taliban. What started as welcome help from abroad grew into a major internal problem for Chechnya.

Aushev still continues to urge Moscow to think of more subtle methods and to distinguish between nationalist Chechen fighters and the foreign-funded Islamic extremists who are trying to provoke and spread—in order to lead—an all-out Holy War. But Moscow remains locked into an indiscriminately repressive strategy and thus continues to play into the hands of those who portray the war in Chechnya as genocide against Muslims that can be stopped only by jihad.

And so the leader of Ingushetia was left to wage his struggle in isolation. This was not the first time that Aushev was abandoned by his superiors. In 1982, he received the gold star of the Hero of the Soviet Union, the highest combat decoration, for a battle that he managed to win despite grievous miscalculation by army staff planners. Aushev, then a young army captain, was assigned to seize a bridge so Soviet tanks could pass over it. Terribly outgunned and pinned down by mujahideen fire for three very long days and nights, Aushev lost a third of his company and was himself badly wounded. He managed, however, to hold the bridge long enough for the tanks to pass. Aushev's bridge too far was in the Panshir Valley, today the stronghold of Afghanistan's Northern Alliance. In that battle his formidable mujahideen opponent was Ahmad Shah Massoud, the hero of Afghani resistance to the Soviets. Massoud was murdered in September 2001 by suicide bombers posing as a TV crew. This assassination took place two days before the attack on the United States and is believed to be a favor done by bin Laden for his Taliban hosts.

After recovering from his wounds, Aushev returned to fight in Afghanistan until the end of war. Today he thinks about this war very differently and seeks to avoid a similarly futile scenario. In 1997, facing the spread of Islamic extremism to Ingushetia and realizing that Moscow was neither listening nor considering helping him, President Aushev began acting on his own. He convened Ingush village elders and asked for their consent in closing brand-new mosques funded by Arab dollars. His police escorted Arab

recruiters out of Ingushetia. Furthermore, President Aushev acquiesced to public opinion and curbed (but prudently did not ban outright) the private distribution of alcohol, which became by far the most profitable market activity in newly capitalist Russia.

At the same time Aushev firmly ruled out detaining young Ingush returning from the war in Chechnya and from camps in the Middle East. Their families were protected from harassment. Instead, village elders paid visits to the homes of the those returning from abroad with new extremist Islamic convictions—quite an extraordinary honor—and conducted the lengthy traditional conversations asking: Don't you feel we are all Ingushes? Don't you see what happened to Chechnya after the Arab money went there? Yes, today we all have problems with declining public morality, but can it be resolved with explosives and abductions? In Moscow they scoffed at this village-level diplomacy, but Aushev was steadfast. Besides, the local police obeyed their president, and Moscow did not want to risk challenging their loyalty by issuing orders contrary to Aushev's.

Aushev used his inordinately charismatic authority to plead with the local communities and the families of these born-again Islamic puritans: take good care of your sons, they are our sons. Get them married, get them busy, help them to build houses, to purchase farmland and livestock, taxicabs or trucks, let us help them find jobs. The latter was not easily done—the rate of unemployment in the adult male population of Ingushetia reaches 90 percent.

The government of Ingushetia stretched its limited resources to employ as many men as possible in the local police, to start a new state university from scratch, to begin building a new capital city (in Soviet times Ingushetia had no real towns at all), to repair and extend roads, to construct modern hotels and a bottling plant for Ingushetia's excellent mineral waters. And, being a general, Aushev called on a dozen of his trusted comrades from the Afghan war to come to Ingushetia as advisers and to teach at the Cadet Corps—a deliberately selective school that issues its students smart uniforms complete with Caucasian silver-clad daggers, and where alongside the curriculum of sciences and humanities the students must learn military discipline, tactics, and ballroom dancing.

In highly controversial moves, President Aushev attempted to legalize polygamy in Ingushetia as well as the ancient highlander tradition of clan vendetta. Both are strictly against the legal codes of the Russian Federation, and at one point Aushev stood close to removal by Russia's Constitutional Court. Aushev was undeterred. Polygamy was, he argued, often the last resort for socially unprotected women, especially widows. Since it already clearly existed and in fact had proliferated in recent years, he reasoned that it was better that it be transparent and regulated by the strictures of Islamic shari'a jurisprudence. The highlander's vendetta (which is, incidentally, against not only Russia's criminal code but Islamic law as well) also was witnessing a resurgence. Increased lawlessness and social degradation left many desperate relatives of victims of crimes, especially hostages abducted for ransom, turning to vendetta. Guns were easy enough to purchase on the black market, and relatives would seek out the abductors on their own. Since this is the case, argued Aushev, at least let them operate in conjunction with Ingushetia's state police. In many cases the hostage takers tried to justify their pecuniary crimes with the fatwa, or Islamic ruling, issued by an Islamic warlord in

Chechnya who reportedly blessed the abduction of infidels, including "bad Muslims," in order to finance the operations of self-proclaimed righteous warriors. Legalizing vendetta was a hard-pressed decision, yet abductions, whether covered by fatwa or not, have been reduced. It is no secret that today there is hardly a home in Ingushetia without a small private arsenal. But those guns remain mostly silent. Many Ingushes are even beginning to consider selling their Kalashnikovs one day to buy a cow or a television. They trust their president, who was stubbornly repeating all along that Ingushetia was not going to become like Afghanistan or Chechnya.

There is little to be gained from a debate on whether Ruslan Aushev is primarily a good Muslim or an intuitively shrewd statesman and truly professional general. And we do not need to lionize him. (Leave that to his own people.) President Aushev improvises his policies—and these improvisations are often dubious—but they are driven by his desperate desire to win peace. Aushev's regime stands closer to enlightened military despotism than Western-style democracy. This crisis-situation political arrangement will inevitably come under attack from educated and critically thinking Ingushes, who are currently few but whose numbers are growing. The situation of women in the deeply patriarchal Ingushetia is not enviable, though it is nothing like Afghanistan. The Ingush women do not veil, many are highly educated and self-assured. I witnessed this myself when the female proprietor of the tidy small cafe where I was eating lunch energetically resisted the bearded mullah who demanded she shut down the eatery because of the fasting requirements during the month of Ramadan. And, yes, I heard voices critical of Aushev, although everyone concedes that he might have saved Ingushetia from a fate similar to that of Chechnya or Afghanistan.

President Aushev needs help and recognition. His largely intuitive strategy awaits a sober and rational assessment. It might not be easily generalizable: Ingushetia is small, mostly mono-ethnic, and deeply patriarchal. Aushev essentially mobilized the patriarchal ethnic traditions and secular Ingush nationalism against the threat of Islamic militancy spreading from the Middle East. Yet it is clear that today we—the scholars, the policymakers, and the conscientious public—must listen to the Ingush leader (though admittedly he is not the greatest speaker) and learn from his actions. Not only because General Ruslan Aushev was the Soviets' best in Afghanistan but also because he is probably the world's only warrior to route Al Qaeda in an honest and open battle.