


## The Chechen Question in Post-1991 Israeli-Russian Relations

### Kwestia czeczeńska w stosunkach izraelsko-rosyjskich po 1991 roku

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**Abstract:** This publication verifies the hypothesis that Chechnya's remaining in the Russian Federation is in the vital interest of both Russia and Israel, which at the same time expects the Russian authorities to pursue a less compromise policy towards Ramzan Kadyrov's rule and to limit Chechnya's autonomy. The problem was presented from a realistic theoretical perspective in the study of international relations, due to its geopolitical dimension and the domination of both energy and anti-terrorist security issues, military strategy, and the competition of powers for influence in this important area.

**Keywords:** Russia, Israel, Chechnya, international relations, geopolitics

**Streszczenie:** W artykule poddano weryfikacji hipotezę, wedle której pozostanie Czeczenii w Federacji Rosyjskiej leży w żywotnym interesie zarówno Rosji, jak i Izraela, który oczekuje jednocześnie, aby władze rosyjskie prowadziły mniej kompromisową politykę wobec władzy Ramzana Kadyrowa i ograniczyły autonomię Czeczenii. Problem ujęto z realistycznej perspektywy teoretycznej w badaniu stosunków międzynarodowych, ze względu na jego wymiar geopolityczny i dominację kwestii bezpieczeństwa energetycznego i antyterrorystycznego, strategii wojskowej oraz rywalizacji mocarstw o wpływy w tym istotnym obszarze.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Rosja, Izrael, Republika Czeczenii, relacje międzynarodowe, geopolityka

The Republic of Chechnya as a subject of the Russian Federation (hereinafter: RF) enjoys a relatively high degree of autonomy *vis-à-vis* the Federal Centre. Like other republics within the RF, Chechnya has state-specific attributes, such as: Constitution, Parliament, President,<sup>1</sup> the supreme court

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<sup>1</sup> According to the 2010 law, individual entities have the right to self-determine the name of the executive body, taking into account historical, traditional, ethnic and other factors. From March 5, 2011, the name of the office was changed to "head of the republic."

or state language, as well as has the right to shape its own system of government by appointing legislative, executive and judicial bodies, and – like any republic – has the right of legislative initiative by submitting a bill to the Federal Assembly (Bodio 2014).

During the final process of political decomposition of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), Chechnya decided to make an attempt to gain independence, which in 1990–2000 was *de facto* achieved.<sup>2</sup> It pursued a foreign policy independent of Moscow, opening chambers of Commerce (Mamaev, Ivanov 1998: 38),<sup>3</sup> appointing consuls (Ferfecki 2021),<sup>4</sup> making official foreign visits to both Western European countries and the United States as well as those of the Islamic world. Having received wide support not only in terms of image and finance, but also in terms of military-intelligence training, it gained an advantage over the Federal Centre, which could not cope with the crisis in the North Caucasus. Part of the Western and Middle Eastern States, attracted by the vision of obtaining particular benefits from the conflict and the weakness of the former world power, made efforts to devalue the image of Russia and provided support to the Chechen separatists. The exception was Israel, vitally concerned not only about the influx of Soviet immigrants, the absorption of which proved to be a huge challenge for a small country in the Middle East, but above all watching the renaissance of Islam, combined with nationalism in the hitherto controlled by the USSR its “Muslim underbelly.” The radicalization of Muslims, especially in the North Caucasus, was interpreted as a real threat to both Russia and Europe, as well as to Israel itself.

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<sup>2</sup> The beginning of Chechen separatism is considered to be the convening of the first Chechen National Congress at the end of 1990, during which the law on the creation of a sovereign Chechen state was adopted. Then in June 1991, the president of the Republic Dzhokhar Dudayev announced the creation of the Chechen Republic of Nochchi-Cho.

<sup>3</sup> In spring 2021 in Washington, the Caucasian-American Chamber of Commerce and industry was registered, the chairman of which was Khozh Noukhayev. Later that year, at an Economic Forum in Switzerland, he stated that his plans were supported by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the World Bank. The main investor in this venture was the British-French financier and member of the European Parliament of the fourth term – James Goldsmith.

<sup>4</sup> Solidarity activist Adam Borowski is the “Honorary Consul of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria” since 2005. Despite the fact that this title is not recognized by the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the person concerned informs that the Chechen “President” Abdul-Khalim Sadulayev himself appointed him consul, and he justifies the legality of the function by comparing it to the Polish government in exile in London and President Ryszard Kaczorowski.

Meanwhile, the self-proclaimed government of Chechnya – Ichkeria established state authorities, adopted the Constitution (it even had time to amend it), according to the content of which the main principles of the Chechen system, contained primarily in chapters I and II, included among others: the principle of sovereignty and state independence, but also a relatively high degree of secularism of political and social life (Szukalski 2014). After Vladimir Putin came to power in the Kremlin, the conflict with Chechnya was unfrozen, and the Russian government made an attempt to restore the insubordinate Republic to the RF. Despite the normalization of the situation in the North Caucasus and the preservation of the territorial integrity of Russia, the Moscow power elites gave the Chechen authorities far-reaching autonomy in the management of the Republic, which was used by the Kadyrov clan. This is evidenced by both formal system solutions and the interpretation of current events in the North Caucasus. The problem of transition in terms of the republic's increasingly independent governance and the Kremlin's near-absence of response to even the most crisis situations in the region worries Israel, among others, with a vital interest in its security and protection from Muslim fundamentalism.

Taking into account Israel's different behaviour towards the Chechen conflict from the western and Middle Eastern states, as well as the reference to this topic in the statements of Israeli politicians emphasizing the importance of maintaining good relations of Jerusalem with Moscow, it is reasonable to take up the topic of the degree of interest in remaining Chechnya within the territory of the RF. This topic is not taken up more widely either in foreign or domestic literature. One can only come across publications on the common policy of Russia and Israel against Islamic terrorism in the world, the community of interests in this regard, but does not pay much attention to the context of the North Caucasus or the Republic of Chechnya. This area is particularly important for geopolitical reasons, even strategic from the point of view of both Russia and the Muslim states, which will be discussed more broadly later in this article.

The publication adopted the hypothesis that Chechnya's remaining in the RF is in the vital interest of Russia and Israel, which at the same time expects the Russian authorities to pursue a less compromise policy towards the power of R. Kadyrov and limit the autonomy of Chechnya. The Problem has been taken from a realistic theoretical perspective in the study of international relations (Zięba, Bieleń, Zajac 2015: 127-152), due to its geopolitical dimension and the dominance of both energy and counter-terrorism

security issues, military strategy and the rivalry of powers for influence in this important area.

The methodology used to develop this topic includes an analysis of the statements of Russian, Israeli and Chechen politicians, as well as a review of press publications and literature on the subject, especially those related to characteristics of Chechen terrorism and its manifestations. The historical perspective was taken into account to the necessary extent due to the importance of the description of the history of the Jews of the Caucasus and part of *Aliyah*<sup>5</sup> of Soviet origin, which has a number of distinctive features in relation to the rest of the Soviet emigration to Israel. Historical analysis is also necessary due to the complexity of the topic of Chechen collaboration with the Third Reich during the German invasion of the USSR during World War II. Unfortunately, access to the historical sources on this subject is limited, which is noted by researchers dealing with the above issue, among others Viatcheslav Avioutskii, Jarosław Gdański, Oleg Matveev and Tomasz Grabowski (Avioutskii 2005; Gdański 2005; Grabowski 2017; Matveev 2017). At the same time, the publications of the highlighted authors turned out to be the most useful from the point of view of the topic of the article.

A proper slant on the issue at hand makes it possible to see the difference between Israel's interests and those of its main ally (the United States). It turns out that not only do they not always coincide, but above all, the Middle Eastern nuclear power<sup>6</sup> knows how important the state – for security and stability in the Middle East – is Russia. The closer cooperation between the two countries in the technological and military sectors and the joint development of strategies against the threat of Islamic radicalism are becoming all the more understandable.

## 1. Geopolitical importance of the North Caucasus

The North Caucasus is an extremely important region from the point of view of geopolitics of Europe, Russia, Central Asia, but also the Middle East. This is due to its geographical location. The Caucasus, as political scientist

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<sup>5</sup> *Aliyah* (Heb. the act of going up) – Jewish immigration to Palestine, and after 1948 to Israel.

<sup>6</sup> Israel does not officially possess nuclear weapons, but according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, it does around 80 nuclear warheads.

and former US National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzeziński aptly put it, is like a “bottle cap” leading to the riches and resources of Central Asia and the Caspian Sea (Brzeziński 1998), because it is the shortest route connecting the region with Europe. However, it should be emphasized that the political scientist first of all had in mind the role of Azerbaijan in the energy market in the Caspian region. It is estimated that the restoration of Russian power throughout the Caucasus (including the South Caucasus) would threaten the independence of the Central Asian states in a real way (Brzeziński 1998).

The attractiveness of the Caucasus is due to its natural resources but most of all to the possibility of their effective transmission. The location of Chechnya was especially appreciated by Western countries in the 1990s of the XX century when the planning of oil production and its transmission began precisely in this area. The Transport of Chechen and Caspian oil was to be carried out using the existing pipeline “Friendship,” that is, run through Russia, Ukraine and further to Western Europe. The second project is the Baku–Grozny–Rostov–Kremenchuk–“Friendship” Pipeline. Then it was supposed to cross the territory of Poland and Germany (Polivanov 1998). The network was planned to expand as far as Iran, so British and American businessmen began lobbying their governments to normalize relations with this – so far isolated – state.<sup>7</sup> From Russia’s point of view, it was and is extremely important to maintain control over the North Caucasus region, since access to transmission routes and raw materials largely determines its power position (Bodio 2009: 86–87).

Another factor affecting the North Caucasus is the undeniable fact that it is a kind of the point of contact for many civilizations, cultures and state organisms, it is an ethnoreligious melting pot (Iwańczuk 2008: 17–18). Muslim Chechnya is usually contrasted with Orthodox Russia, which would contribute to the conflict only on this line. Meanwhile, throughout its history, the North Caucasus has been “bathed” in a sea of various influences. The population of this area was adjacent to various peoples of the Great Steppe (Scythians, Sarmatians, Cumans, Huns, Avars; Gumilov 1973; Mikołajec, Wendt 2017), Persians, Greeks,<sup>8</sup> Byzantium, Arabs

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<sup>7</sup> The United States was the most sceptical about the idea of involvement in the Iran Project. Since the RF was not considered as a partner in this regard, a harsh narrative was continued against the actions of the Russian services and military in Chechnya. The rhetoric was changed only by Prime Minister Tony Blair when Georgia refused to transit Chechen oil through its territory, and thus left its existing potential contractors to themselves.

<sup>8</sup> It is about the Greek colony of Dioscuria, today’s Sukhumi.

(caliphate) and Khazars. Contact with the Slavs was much later, but no less important.

All these centres have left their mark on the population of the area in question. In Europe, states went through successive stages of development: feudalism, absolute monarchy, and national revolutions, while the North Caucasus did not experience such changes. Although the Chechens possessed certain forms of statehood with a 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup>-century pedigree, they were not enough to form a compact state organism capable of resisting Russian ambitions in this area. Thus, the Caucasus, including Chechnya, which lies within its territory, is an area of contact of many cultures and religions, experienced in this respect historically. At the same time, it was peripheral to the centres of influence that affected it.

The above conditions must make the ground suitable not only for the emergence of ethnopolitical conflicts but also for the interests of the Great Powers, who are well aware of these features of the region. The complexity of the problems and their historical background is so great that, e.g., according to Kamil Gołaś, one cannot speak of the "Balkanization" of the Caucasus, but rather the "Caucasization" of the Balkans (Gołaś 2011: 110). This is used both by external forces and by the power elites of the Republic of Chechnya themselves.

The difficult history of the relationship of the Chechens with the Russian Empire and then the USSR was widely used during the conflict of the Republic with the Federal Centre in the 1990s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. On banknotes, topographic maps, leaflets, and postage stamps, symbols referring to the history of the Chechens were presented: defensive towers, Imam Shamil, the great Caucasian War, the motif of the legendary wolf, etc. (Coudroy 2005).<sup>9</sup> During the period of the Russian-Chechen conflict, these procedures played

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<sup>9</sup> An interesting issue is a map of Chechnya released in the 90s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century during the Russian-Chechen conflict. This cartographic project, according to the interpretation of French scientists, was not only intended to provide humanitarian and material assistance to the Chechen population in the Republic. The map had primarily a political meaning, which was given by the affixing of its "images strengthening the national identity" (a term coined by the French geographer Jean Gottmann): stamps containing illustrations referring to the history of the Chechens, with the name "Ichkeria" appearing, passports of the Republic of Ichkeria, biographies of Chechen war heroes, etc. It can be concluded that the creation of the map was not - contrary to the assurances of the creators - only to help in the topographical orientation of humanitarian activists, but above all to fall into the hands of the Chechens themselves and influence their sovereignty ambitions.

an integrative role and justified the right of Chechens to political self-determination. Thanks to the appeal to the *adat*<sup>10</sup> tradition also on the part of the secessionist Chechen elite, the Islamisation (Middle Eastern-style) of the Chechens has been limited. Nevertheless, a sense of belonging to the global Muslim *ummah*<sup>11</sup> remained in the republic, and this is now becoming one of the factors contributing to Chechnya's civilisational remoteness.

This does not mean that the infiltration of the republic, like other Muslim republics of the RF, by Muslim groups of external origin, financed by the Middle Eastern States, has ceased. Although the revival of Islam in the RF area, as well as in the former Islamic republics of the Soviet Union, was already noticeable in the 1980s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Voroncova, Filatov, Furman 1994: 40)<sup>12</sup> and it continued until its peak in the 1990s of the last century. However, as it turns out, in the North Caucasus, this process did not end or produce a form of "rite" that could coexist in symbiosis with the Federal Centre. Although acts of terror and hostility on the part of the Republic do not take forms similar to those of the end of the last century, one can see some dangerous tendencies, manifested in the policy of the Kadyrovs.

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<sup>10</sup> *Adat* (Arab.) – customary law functioning in Chechnya in parallel with Sharia law, resulting from Islamic attitudes of faith.

<sup>11</sup> *Umma* or *ummah* (Arab.) – in Arabic means the nation, the community, and in the religious (Islamic) sense, the entire Islamic community.

<sup>12</sup> Like Iwona Kaliszewska, I believe that the re-Islamization of the North Caucasus was not an idea related to the "romantic" return of the Muslim peoples of the region to the faith of their ancestors or an attempt to overcome (at a convenient time) the Soviet atheization that lasted for several decades, but it was of a national nature. The argument for the perception of the processes of the time in this way is the high degree of the superficiality of the Islamic identification of the peoples of the North Caucasus at that time. Although a Muslim press was published, political groups referring to the faith of Muhammad were founded and mosques were rebuilt, and on the part of the union centre, among other things, a law came into force allowing the public manifestation of their religiosity, the people of the North Caucasus regarded Islam primarily as an element of ethnic self-identification. A certain degree of "coming out" of the population of the RF with their faith outside the private sphere was then noticeable throughout the country.

## 2. Chechenization and re-Islamization

The Islamization Of Chechnya (Grochmalski 2003: 50)<sup>13</sup> was done in several stages. Each time this has happened (and continues to happen) with the broad participation of various foreign religious organizations, which do this essentially in the name of the power policy of their superiors. Already in the 80s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century religious newspapers began to be published, mosques were opened, and religious elites travelled to the countries of the Middle East for both religious and educational purposes. Muslims from the Soviet area expanded their contacts with the Islamic motherland. This happened outside the control of the union centre, and as a result contributed not only to the emergence of separatist tendencies in the area of the Russian "Islamic underbelly" (Diec 2015: 144)<sup>14</sup> but above all it opened the way to the transformation of Muslim peoples in the post-Soviet area. The lack of control of the federal centre over the education of the Muslim clergy meant that it could not control the content and forms given in sermons and in schools. This process has its origins even before the collapse of the USSR, and it contributed decisively to the decomposition and weakening of the Soviet, and then Russian, state.

The next stage was re-Islamization, which was already taking place openly. The disintegration of the Soviet Union allowed non-government organizations, including those of Middle Eastern origin, to penetrate deeper into those entities that, although still in a relationship with Moscow, had sovereignty ambitions. One of them was Chechnya, where Saudi, Turkish and Iranian (or Al-Qaida-linked) non-government organizations (NGOs) began their activities. The policies of these actors created jobs in the republic, built schools and orphanages, financially supported those most in need, and religiously educated young people and adults (Wilhelmsen 2004: 29).<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> In the literature, there is often - next to the concept of "revival" - the term "Islamization," which I think is unfortunately chosen for the topic, because Islamization is the process of implementing the Muslim faith in a given area, where it did not occur before, and not a return to it. Meanwhile, as I mentioned earlier, In Chechenya Islam arrived much earlier. Some researchers believe that this happened already in the XV century, while others move this moment to the XVIII century.

<sup>14</sup> This is the term used, among others, by Joachim Diec against the Muslim subjects of the RF, formerly the USSR, and its author is Alexander Solzhenitsyn.

<sup>15</sup> Mosques and boarding schools for Chechen orphans were also built, where children were taught Arabic and Middle Eastern interpretations of the Koran and Sunni codes of



Although initially, the Chechen separatists were happy to help, after some time they realized that under the guise of empathy and activism there was an attempt to modify the national identity of the Chechens in a direction that was definitely alien to them. From the point of view of Middle Eastern Islam, Chechen Islam is *shirk*<sup>16</sup> because of its adat nature. The Chechen people themselves in their history have experienced many attempts to “convert” them to Sunni Islam, but without success, ending up depopulating their area of residence, seeking asylum outside the Republic or practising the rite in secret.

During the Russian-Chechen wars, religious radicalization was driven by external factors, however, during the conflict, the Chechen elites themselves recognized this phenomenon as unfavourable both from a cultural and diplomatic point of view, i.e. no western state will support a religiously radical entity, and such support was especially sought at that time. The problem returned in 2000–2007 when the conflict was unfrozen by V. Putin, the new president of the RF, who was trying to rebuild his country’s power position. There were terrorist attacks carried out by the Chechens and with the complicity of their Middle Eastern partners. This coincided with the terrorist attacks in the United States, as well as negotiations between the Israeli side and the leader of the Palestinian Liberation Movement, Yasser Arafat, in which Russia was involved. Russia supported the Middle East peace process and The Oslo Accords in 1993. Yasir Arafat had been a frequent visitor to Moscow since the 1990s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century until 2001. However, relations also faced obstacles due to the involvement of Palestine in the Chechen wars. When the United States discovered the use of shale gas and thus lost interest in Caspian natural resources, it reduced support for the Chechen side of the conflict. The Kadyrov party came to power in the republic, renouncing the fight with Moscow and declaring its intention to arrange relations with the Russian government in a conciliatory manner.

Officially, the current Chechen government is fighting a Salafist guerilla on its territory, which makes the atmosphere of guerilla-subversive civil war. Chechen youth unsatisfied with opportunities for development joins the militants. A permanent struggle between Muslim radicals and

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conduct. Young people who did not have a chance to grow up in a traditional Chechen family *de facto* did not know the alternative way of thinking or customs, therefore, they easily became faithful, rank-and-file fighters of Islamic fundamentalism.

<sup>16</sup> *Shirk* (Arab.) – in Islam, the sin of worshipping something or someone other than Allah.

the Chechen authorities, supported primarily financially by the Kremlin, is taking place (Kaliszewska 2011). Such a simplified picture is widely presented both in journalism and in scientific literature and documentary. However, the situation is much more complex.

At present, the third wave of re-Islamization of Chechnya, supported by the Kadyrov family, can be observed. In fact, the fighters for the Caucasus Emirate are not fought by the Chechen services because of its opposition to Salafi Islam in doctrinal terms, for example. Anti-Salafist activity stems from the desire to create an ideological and religious monopoly by the Kadyrov family. The Islam that is offered by Chechnya's ruling elite is no less "puritanical" in practice than that promoted by the Al-Qaeda- and so-called Islamic State (ISIS) backed terrorist groups. Chechen authorities support various Sunni social tendencies, such as polygamy (Kaliszewska 2011: 105)<sup>17</sup> not just among the rich. The principle of four wives in practice is not observed, and permission to have many wives and lovers comes from the mullahs themselves, after all, educated most often in Russia, and yet promoting practices foreign to the Chechens.<sup>18</sup> This is officially explained by the difficult social situation of widows and the need to maintain an optimal level of natural growth. If even at the time of the Stalinist displacements this could in fact constitute some justification, today it clearly does not constitute the cause of such a state of affairs.

The situation of women in Chechnya increasingly resembles the Middle East model. The traditional division of marital responsibilities is understandable when the man takes up gainful employment and the lower-paid woman generally stays at home and takes care of the children, however, in the case of Chechens, the men mostly do not work. The bulk of the duties falls on the woman, who usually functions not only in a non-monogamous relationship (this gives rise to conflicts),<sup>19</sup> but above all, she can not decide her fate. Phenomena contrary to federal law, such as arranged marriages,

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<sup>17</sup> In Ingushetia, polygamy was even briefly legalized by President Ruslan Aushev.

<sup>18</sup> In the mosque in Makhachkala, the mullah conducts a kind of matchmaking – women who would like to be second wives come to him, and he announces this in a sermon and encourages men to marry. Such practices are becoming increasingly popular in almost all of the North Caucasus.

<sup>19</sup> The conflict in such situations concerns not only the jealousy of one wife for another but also the creation of alternative relationships with Russian women by the Chechens migrating to the European part of Russia. And the non-Chechen woman does not realize that she is participating in a love triangle. Muslim clerics do not oppose such action.

marriages of underage women, "matrimonial" kidnappings, honour killings, and the obstruction of girls and women to obtain an education, are becoming common. Counter-intuitively, better education for women, especially in European educational centres, would be conducive to levelling Muslim radicalism in the republic, as an educated wife could positively influence her husband. In addition, the predominance of women with higher education would be a force to "make" the female part of Chechen society aware of their situation. Unfortunately, the jurisprudence of the Koran is increasingly evident in the social life of the Republic. Women working in offices are required to wear headscarves and long skirts, while men are encouraged to dress in traditionally Muslim rather than Chechen or "European" clothing. The Republic periodically bans alcohol (the police punish people who drink alcohol on New Year's Eve), and criminalizes homosexuality and the authorities insist that they expect boys born on Muhammad's birthday to bear his name.

Dignitaries of Arab countries are present at Republican ceremonies, e.g., Alsheikh Abdulatif Abdulaziz, the minister of religious affairs of Saudi Arabia, arrived at the opening ceremony of the mosque in Grozny. It should be noted that although Muslims constitute the majority in several regions of Russia (Ingushetia, Chechnya, Dagestan, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachay-Cherkessia, Bashkortostan, Tatarstan), nowhere are religious principles so strongly promoted by the authorities and do not affect daily life to such an extent as in Chechnya.

At the same time, Chechenisation is taking place in the republic, which – from the Kremlin's point of view – is no less dangerous for the integration of the state and the nation within the so-called policy of *rossijskoj nacii*.<sup>20</sup> In schools, offices and in the media, the Russian language is used less and less. Ramzan Kadyrov even has his own armed forces based on the former operational battalions of the Soviet Ministry of Internal Affairs, and now only formally subordinate to the Russian National Guard, which at the same time can be considered both his private army and the seed of the Chechen "national army." The republican services enjoy wide autonomy from the federal level security services, which even manifests itself as

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<sup>20</sup> *Rossijskoj nacii* (Rus.) – the program of integration of the Russian people around the idea of Russian citizenship as a binder for the multiethnic Russian people implemented by the administration of President V. Putin.

autonomy to take action within the republic. Only the local Federal Security Service was left under the control of the central authorities in Chechnya.

Although more than 80% of the Republic's revenues come from federal subsidies, the federal centre controls only the energy sector in Chechnya. The disproportion of the Kremlin's contribution to what it receives in return is becoming increasingly apparent. Chechen power elites derive additional profits from tributes paid by local state and private institutions to the Akhmad Kadyrov Foundation, which is linked to the Kadyrov family (Benedyczak 2019). This independence of action was particularly noticeable when there was a *de facto* annexation by the Republic of Chechnya of part of its neighbour's territory and attempts were made to take similar action against the other.<sup>21</sup> Thus, it turns out that the sovereignty of the Russian authorities in Chechnya is threatened, and anti-terrorist security really leaves much to be desired. Thus, it is reasonable to conclude that Chechnya is increasingly moving away, both civilizationally and religiously, from the whole and from other Islamic entities of the RF. This implies the emergence of legitimate concerns on the part of countries threatened by Muslim terrorism and the RF itself. The most vulnerable country to Islamist activity is definitely Israel, which, as an ally of the United States, also pays attention to how the situation regarding anti-terrorist security is shaping up in Russia.

### 3. The Republic of Chechnya in the perception of Israel and Russia

The relationship between the Caucasus and the Middle East, as established above, is culturally and religiously specific, i.e. the Middle Eastern countries of the Islamic world interact with the Islamic republics of both the North Caucasus and the South Caucasus, as this area is a natural target for the imperial ambitions of Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey in particular. Historically, the Republic of Chechnya was once home to a relatively numerous Jewish

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<sup>21</sup> Ramzan Kadyrov forcibly made the neighbouring Republic of Ingushetia give up 10% of its territory to Chechnya, which he rules. This caused mass protests of the Ingush people and, as a result, the resignation of the leader of Ingushetia. Subsequently, the Chechen authorities forced the Republic of Dagestan to undertake similar talks on territorial changes. Despite the tensions in Ingushetia, the Russian Constitutional Court approved the Chechen-Ingush border agreement, and the central authorities do not intervene in the case of an unprecedented shift of borders inside the RF.

minority. Those Jews used several dialects of the Tat language (the western branch of the Iranian language group). They were probably descendants of Jews from northern Iran, and perhaps also from the nearby regions of the Byzantine Empire, who settled among the population speaking this language. This population change began during the Muslim conquests in these areas (639–643) and lasted until the Mongol conquest (mid-13<sup>th</sup> century). Until the 18<sup>th</sup> century, in the area of present-day Azerbaijan and southern Dagestan, there was actually a whole belt of Jewish settlements, and the largest of the settlements, Aba Sawa, was the centre of the spiritual life of Mountain Jews. The peace was disturbed by the outbreak of the Caucasian War (1817–1864), when religious radicalization occurred in the North Caucasus, induced by the power of Imam Shamil. The Vainakhs began to forcibly convert Jews to Islam and force them to participate in the fighting. Mountain Jews, despite the introduction by the Tsarist administration of regulations on the area of their residence, decided to flee to the territory controlled by The Empire, later developing economic activities there (Centre for Research on Jewish Communities of the Caucasus and Central Asia 2021). Part of the Jewish community remained in the Caucasus, where they functioned alongside the Muslim majority until the collapse of the USSR.

Soviet Jews from the Caucasus, who experienced intense antireligious actions throughout the Soviet Union, nevertheless retained their religious and cultural identity. According to the author, this was due to the presence of this group in a Muslim environment, in which mixed marriages were probably rare and, despite the relatively “tolerant” and even absorbing nature of the local taipes, there was a kind of self-isolation from each other; the Jewish and Muslim populations lived in parallel with each other, and religious elements performed an important distinctive function, so they could not disappear. Certainly, a significant role was played by the geographical and environmental factors, which makes the Caucasus a separate, isolated area from the rest of the country.

In addition, this area is infiltrated by Islamist organizations through the three powers. The Caucasus itself, on the other hand, and more precisely – the ability to manage the situation in it, is the potential for influencing the states of Central Asia and the Middle East. Changes in the Caucasus induced by Islamic countries will also affect the situation in the Middle East, while any unrest and conflict will result in, among other things, uncontrolled emigration of the population, the emergence of armed militias and the feeding of terrorist organisations by people of Caucasian origin.

The importance of Chechens both as members of the *ummah* and as fighters is indicated by their participation in stabilising the situation in Syria and fighting ISIS, admittedly as part of the Russian army, but at the same time as participants in the negotiations. Several thousand Chechen soldiers are currently stationed in Syria, doing well in the Middle East, not only for religious reasons but also for topographic and terrain reasons.<sup>22</sup> The effectiveness of the struggle is also influenced by the national character of the Chechens, educated in a difficult mountain climate. They are therefore an extremely important element of the Russian army, but at the same time, in the event of a conflict between the Republic and the federal centre, they are a very difficult opponent, as Russia has often found out (Rudee 2016).<sup>23</sup>

Despite the differences between Russia and Israel, Moscow acts as a stabilizer in the Middle East, which is why both sides try not to conflict even in the light of different positions on the Syrian issue and Bashar al-Assad. Cooperation between Russia and Israel is of strategic importance for both sides since it concerns almost all possible spheres of cooperation, i.e. from the modernization of Agriculture (Azulai 2019; Collinson 2016)<sup>24</sup> to precious metals trading (*Branża diamentowa w Izraelu 2020*),<sup>25</sup> to – what is particularly

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<sup>22</sup> Due to their mountainous origins, Ossetians and Chechens excel at so-called mountain scouting and difficult natural-atmospheric conditions. In the Middle East, this ability is better developed than the Slavs or Asians.

<sup>23</sup> In the fight against Muslim terrorists, including in missions abroad, Russia benefits from the unique military capabilities and Islamic identity of the Chechens, while Israel militarily engages dedicated and courageous Druze, including those with physical and intellectual dysfunctions.

<sup>24</sup> The Israeli Ministry of Agriculture has been relatively instrumental in modernizing and increasing the productivity of the Russian agricultural sector, making Russia a grain exporter rather than an importer for the first time since the Russian Empire. Economic sanctions hit the Russian food market hard, and as a result, the country was threatened with shortages in this regard. Israel, as a country experienced in the field of plant and animal farming in adverse climatic conditions, has proved to be an excellent partner for Russian agriculture, which has been declining until recently.

<sup>25</sup> An important branch of economic cooperation is, e.g., the trade in diamonds. Israel is one of the largest centres of diamond grinding and international trade. Depending on the year, the share of diamond production in the entire Israeli industry is 19–23. It is the Russian raw material that largely goes to Israeli (as well as Belgian) grinding mills, and then to world stock exchanges and jewellery stores around the world. Russian Federation currently owns 40% of the diamond trading market, and its monopolist company is Alrosa, which, in addition to managing raw material processing plants and power plants, operates kimberlite chimneys in Siberia and has significant stakes in mines located in Africa. Importantly, the company established several sales offices around the world, among others in London (United Kingdom), Antwerp

important from the point of view of this text – military technologies (Hilsman 2019).<sup>26</sup> In the military dimension, there is now continuous and comprehensive coordination between the Israeli and Russian armed forces at many levels, with the assistant chiefs of Staff of Russia and Israel at its peak. It is in the interests of both sides to avoid a confrontation, even a tactical one, between Israeli and Russian forces, which could lead to an escalation between the two countries (as happened between Russia and Turkey) and even regional instability. On the other hand – from the point of view of the Russian side-Israel also has a real impact on the stability of the situation in the region and the development of events.

In the context of the Chechen Republic, Israel was, as much in the 1990s as now, particularly concerned both with the stability of the North Caucasus and the functioning of the most secular and non-fundamentalist governments possible in the region. An expression of support for the secularization of the social and political life of the region was the presence of an Israeli delegation at the swearing-in of President Aslan Maskhadov (Maciejak 2018: 169) during the practical independence of Chechnya. It was then – as already mentioned – that the Constitution of independent Chechnya was adopted, written in a very Western European spirit in terms of value (Szukalski 2014). The Islam-dominated, increasingly spiritually Sunni Republic not only has separatist potential but is a convenient collaborator for the proliferation of masses of people involved in Muslim terrorist organizations originating mainly from the Fergana Valley.<sup>27</sup> Although

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(Belgium), Hong Kong (China), and Dubai (United Arab Emirates), as well as in the United States and Israel. City Natania, where most of Israel's diamond mills are located, has become known as the Diamond City. Other grinding plants known for quantity and quality are located in Tel Aviv and its Ramat Gan district.

<sup>26</sup> The Russian side is also interested in buying and using Israeli military inventions, such as drones. The origins of this peculiar transaction can be traced back to the 2008 Russian-Georgian conflict when the RF suffered from a lack of Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) technology, which many of its Russian rivals had at the time. Until 2001, Israel Aerospace Industries signed a \$ 400 million contract to transfer UAV technology to Russia. The Israeli press speculated that Israel's openness to the deal was part of a long-running series of *quid pro quos* in exchange for Russia's consent to stop the delivery of S-300 anti-aircraft missiles to Iran and Syria. Despite possible United States government concerns about the spread of advanced weapons technology from an Israeli ally to a Russian adversary, the Israeli military has begun training Russian officers to operate drones. This technology is used by the Russians in Syria.

<sup>27</sup> This is facilitated by the "relay" nature of the region's position relative to Central Asia and the Middle East.

the Government of R. Kadyrov is fighting the forest fundamentalist guerilla on the territory of the country, it is doing so solely for pragmatic reasons. Increasingly frequent contacts of Caucasian clerics, including Chechen clerics, with Middle Eastern centres, also disturb the Israeli side. Such contacts are easier to establish because of the relatively large and influential Chechen minority living in many countries of the Middle East. Chechens serve, among others, in the Turkish army and in the Turkish special services (Tur. *Millî İstihbarat Teşkilatı* – MIT; Avioutskaa 2001). Many members of the Turkish government at the time were of Chechen origin, e.g., Chief of the General Staff of the Turkish army Dogan Giirefl (Tourmarkine 1996: 171–172) or the minister of defence of Turkey. The conciliatory in the beginning, the Kadyrov family is clearly metamorphosing the Republic and the Chechen people in a direction that worries both Russia (which now quietly accepts the insubordination of the Republican elites) and Israel.

Jerusalem has been making many gestures of favour toward Russia, starting with the Kremlin's partial departure from its staunch support for the Palestinian issue and Arafat. Israel has maintained far-reaching reticence in condemning Russian policies. The Israeli side did not join the states, which decided to impose sanctions on Russia due to the emergence of a crisis in relations between Moscow and Kiev after the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, apparently expecting support from the RF in the Middle East (Williams 2018). A similar example is the suspected poisoning of Sergei Skripal, a former Russian spy, and his daughter on British soil in March 2018. After a wave of criticism of Russia by many countries, Israel issued a statement condemning the law, not to mention Russia's responsibility. Israeli politicians in their statements showed far-reaching restraint and maximally took into account the needs of the Russian side.

A possible source of disagreement between Russia and Israel is the fact that Russia sells weapons to Israel's most important enemies, including Hezbollah, and the broad military cooperation of Israel with Russia's enemies. A particularly high-profile example of the rearmament of the opposing side was the Russian-Georgian conflict when the Georgian army used both Israeli weapons and was trained by the Israeli military (Shachtman 2008). However, in light of the above example, it should be noted that Israel conducts arms trade and provides training essentially because of strong American protection. Jerusalem, under US pressure, has had to, among other things, halt arms sales to Beijing, and cooperation with Moscow is also (despite possible best intentions) being rationed by Washington.



Russia would have to offer Israel an absolutely better offer, above all protection against potential aggression from the Islamic environment, so that it could fully “independently” decide on open technological assistance to the FR. Russia, however, clearly benefits more from being underdetermined in its pattern of behaviour, if only for the fact that the RF is home to some 20 million Muslims (Budzisz 2019).

At the same time, it should be noted that despite the protection of the United States and, as it were, the pressure of the American power elites, Israel is doing quite well with conducting an independent policy of exporting its own weapons. Despite the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war on February 24, 2022, there has not yet been – at least according to official sources of information – a transfer of arms to the Ukrainian side, despite many Israeli promises (*Izrael nie wyśle broni na Ukrainę* 19.10.2022). One can think that this is a symptom of an extremely cautious and measured foreign policy pursued by Jerusalem, which is keen not to be seen as an unequivocal ally or even a party to a conflict that does not directly concern it. In addition, the Israeli side fears that such a move would significantly worsen its relations with Russia, which, as part of such strong Israeli support for Ukraine, could help Iran build a missile launcher in Syria, which would make this place an excellent area for carrying out attacks on Israeli targets. Israeli diplomats emphasize that without good relations with Russia, Israel’s security would be particularly threatened since only Russia has the real power to influence both the Syrian dictator and Iran. Russia allows Israel to carry out attacks on targets in Syria, but all this is done under the clear protection and knowledge of the Russian side, which fully controls the Syrian air zone. This is why it must not be the case that a Russian soldier or target is in any way affected – often jointly coordinated with Russia to no small extent – by Israeli missile attacks. Israel, however, has not joined the sanctions against Moscow, and there is no prospect of such a thing happening in the near future.

While Israel could provide assistance to Ukraine in the form of, e.g., the use of the so-called Iron Dome, this would require the agreement of both the United States and Israel, which has not given such an agreement. The Israeli government – symptomatically – was well aware of the situation that was about to arise, because it began organizing the emigration of Ukrainian Jews to Israel as early as January 2022 (*Izrael przygotowuje się na masową emigrację ukraińskich Żydów* 24.01.2022). The situation is also not helped by the careless statements of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, who, during his March visit to Israel before the assembled Knesset, compared

the situation in his country to a “final solution to the Jewish question,” which was met with sharp opposition and criticism even from Prime Minister Natalie Bennett himself. Despite the Jewish origin of the Ukrainian president himself (or rather, we can talk about the Soviet-Jewish identity due to the time of the birth of the president of Ukraine), we are not dealing with a decidedly anti-Russian attitude of Jerusalem towards Moscow. This is not in Israel’s interest, even for security reasons, because of its geographical location.

The Russian side is clearly trying to create a mutually beneficial policy. It does this through historical policy, diplomacy or social policy, but also through economic and technological cooperation. Russia, especially after the imposition of sanctions on it, was severely affected by its lack of innovation, and long neglect of modernization in the agricultural sector, which resulted in widespread food imports and dependence on it, as well as excessive dependence on energy exports. Israel has provided Russia with support on many levels, which has resulted in the avoidance of problems in some of these issues. At a time when most Western countries have done much to the detriment of Moscow and have tried to stimulate various factors conducive to Russia’s political turmoil, Israel has shown (though bound by a web of dependence on these entities) a far-reaching understanding of Russian political and economic priorities. Thus, it can be concluded that the RF can to some extent, to the extent of Israeli capabilities, count on Israel’s support for maintaining the North Caucasus in a state of dependence on Russia. This policy stems from Jerusalem’s vital interest in maintaining security in the face of a potential threat from Islamic fundamentalists.

## Conclusions

The experience of the Chechen wars, during which foreign factors – including the import of Middle Eastern Salafism into the North Caucasus – played a significant role in destabilizing the situation in the RF, sensitized the Russian power elites to the issue of Islamic terrorism. These concerns found lasting support precisely in the case of the state of Israel (the support of the United States turned out to be temporary), also interested in combating Islamic fundamentalism. The Israeli power elite itself is also known for the “besieged fortress syndrome,” which is one of the accusations against the policy

of the RF, caused by a hostile environment. The scale of mutual assistance in this area is clearly underestimated by Polish scholars and is an interesting case of cooperation between countries with far different values.<sup>28</sup>

For example, the Russian-Chechen wars and Islamic terrorism have been compared to Nazi Germany. Similarly, the alliance of Russia and the United States in the campaign in Afghanistan was compared with the anti-Hitler coalition. What is particularly symptomatic is that the Israeli side, through the mouth of its politicians, expressed itself about the conflict in the North Caucasus in a similar tone, but referring to the so-called Palestinian question (Javedanfar 2008).

The ties of the separatist republic's elites with the political and economic elites in Moscow did not make it easier for President V. Putin to resolve the Russian-Chechen conflict. Almost the whole world has decided to support the Chechen separatists both in terms of image and financial terms. The exception to this was Israel, which was well aware of the problem and threat of Muslim fundamentalism. Israel sees Russia as an excellent partner in combating jihadism and neutralizing this – dangerous for the Jewish State – factor (*PM Netanyahu Meets with Russian President Putin* 2017). It was not without reason that Israeli decision-makers shied away from criticizing Russia during the conflict in Chechnya (Amos 2003),<sup>29</sup> and today they refer to the rightness of the intervention of federal troops in the territory of this Republic, comparing the Russian-Chechen wars to the so-called Palestinian question. Ultimately, both sides recognize – in this respect – that they are fighting a common enemy (Katz 2005).

Israel, as with other Muslim-dominated regions, has a vested interest in its stabilisation, but under the protection of non-Muslim powers. Just as Saudi Arabia is a strategic ally of the United States and would not allow itself to pursue a policy that is clearly hostile to Israel, so the North Caucasus (but also other Muslim RF entities) becomes less of a threat if it is part of Russia. Unfortunately, the trends that have emerged in the Chechen Republic and point to its civilisational distance from the rest of the RF, such as the Islamisation of social and political life, among others, are a source of

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<sup>28</sup> That is why good relations and cooperation between Russia and Israel are not seen by Turkey, Iran and Arab countries as threatening their security, because they are not based on a community of values.

<sup>29</sup> It is interesting to note that veterans of the Chechen-Russian wars became the base for the creation of a sniper unit by the Israel Defence Forces, the so-called Immigrant (Aliyah) Brigade.

concern for both Jews living in the RF and in Israel. The Problem turns out to be all the more pressing when one notices the high degree of independence in the conduct of R. Kadyrov's foreign policy with the Middle Eastern countries, as well as the lack of reaction of the federal centre to his expansionary policy towards neighbouring entities. It is in the interests not only of Israel but also of Russia to have a possibly secular Chechnya, unfiltered by Salafist terrorist groups<sup>30</sup> and dependent on the Kremlin.

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<sup>30</sup> It can be assumed that Israel, unofficially, but in coordination with Russian counterintelligence, is conducting its own actions against Salafist groups in Chechnya.

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