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<b>English Articles 1-78</b>
<b>Persian Articles 79-206</b>



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*In the beginning all people were one nation* (Holy Qur'an, 2:213)  
Throughout human history, peace has always been the 'primary state' and war the 'accidental state'. Peace is beautiful, compassionate and constructive, while war is fearsome, merciless and destructive. Unfortunately, despite this, war has been one of 20<sup>th</sup> century's most major problems, and has proved to be the symbol of the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As portrayed by the contemporary history of international relations, particularly in the Middle East and Central Asia, war is not the solution, nor is it constructive or helpful in solving problems; rather, it causes problems and is the root of the continuation of violence, instability and insecurity.

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(Holy Qur'an, 3:104)

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3. Respecting and considering the valid interests of all parties which have a vested interest in any given conflict.
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5. Realistic understanding of the realities of the world.
6. Upholding and respecting human rights and the principles of democracy.
7. Accepting and moving towards the destruction of weapons of mass destruction throughout the world/on a global scale

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**Just Peace Diploamcy Journal**  
International Peace Studies Centre (IPSC)

**Articles**

**فهرست**

**The New Egypt and the change of the balance of power in the Middle East**  
Seyed G Safavi  
[1-10]

- تروریسم: گونه شناسی جدید مبتنی بر آگاهی توزیع شده  
دکتر سید یحیی صفوی، دکتر علیرضا فرشچی  
{۷۹-۹۸}

**Hizb al-Tahrir al-Islami (Islamic Party of Liberation) and Future of Islamism in Central Asia**  
Farhad Navaei  
[11-30]

- جدال در حاشیه و رویارویی ژئوپلیتیکی با ایران  
ابراهیم منقی {۹۹-۱۱۶}  
- بحران سوریه و بازآفرینی انقلاب‌های رنگی در دوران  
اوباما، دکتر زهره پوستین‌چی {۱۱۷-۱۲۴}

**Poverty and Its Impact on the Spread of Islamic Fundamentalism in the Sub – Continent (Case Study: Bangladesh)**  
Mehdi Madani and Mehdi Toosi  
[31-48]

- تحولات سوریه و سناریوهای احتمالی: تحلیل بر  
اساس مدل سناریو نویسی ادراکی  
محمد صادق جوکار {۱۲۵-۱۵۴}

**Neo-Islamism in Chechnya and Wahhabism**  
Abazar Barari  
[49-66]

- امریکا و ثبات خلیج فارس در روند رقابت‌های  
ژئوپلیتیکی ایران - عربستان  
دکتر طاهره ترابی {۱۵۵-۱۷۴}

**Revisiting the Chechen Crisis through an Iranian Prism Historical and Strategical Considerations**  
Kafkazli Seyed Javad  
[67-78]

- تحلیل و بررسی آینده لیبی پس از قذافی  
گفتگو با دکتر احمد بخشی {۱۹۳-۲۰۲}  
- سیاست دوگانه ی عربستان سعودی در قبال تحولات  
خاورمیانه گفتگو با دکتر علی اکبر اسدی  
{۲۰۳-۲۰۶}

*Persian Articles [79-206]*

مقالات انگلیسی {۱-۷۸}

## **Revisiting the Chechen Crisis through an Iranian Prism Historical and Strategic Considerations**

Kafkazli Seyed Javad  
International Peace Studies Centre (IPSC)

### **Abstract**

In this paper, the author explores the "Chechen Crisis" through an Iranian perspective. It is argued that while the Northern Caucasus, as part of the Islamic World, has played a pivotal role in Iranian geopolitics and geoculture (e.g. the Naghshebanideh and Qaderiyyeh Orders) at present the Chechen question is deeply interconnected to the "Colonial Pattern" of Russian expansionism which has left its imprints on the fabric of sociopolitical, cultural, religious, military and economic life since the treaties of Gulestan, Turkmenchay and Akhal, imposed on Iran during the early 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. In addition, the author has attempted to investigate the current paradoxes that the Russian government is facing today based on fieldwork in the Caucasian region. It is believed that the dominant trends in the region are escalating toward conflicts which are ultimately due to "Inhumane Policies" of the Russian



Intelligence Service (FSB); the region may be pushed, in the near future, toward total separation from the Russian Federation. In this case, one should fathom different scenarios in the Muslim republics around the Caspian Sea and the probable consequences of these respective scenarios for the legal regime of the northern borders of Iran and the presence of extra-regional powers along these shores.

**Keywords:** Chechen, Iran, Russia, England, Colonial Historiography.

## Introduction

For the last 130 years the colonial aggression of Russia in collaboration with England and the constant rivalries between Ottoman Turks (of Turkey), Safavid and Qajar Turks (of Iran) led to the partitioning of the Caucasus by Russia. Through a brutal colonial system, Russia has resorted to various methods of domination: genocide (Circassian case), forced deportation (Chechen and Ingush cases), assassination of elites (Azeri, Daghestani and Lak cases of Shiite Ulema) and so on in quelling northern Caucasian peoples' desires to cast off the yoke of Colonialism. Caucasia has always been part of various Iranian empires throughout their history. After Islam, and particularly after the gradual emergence of the Moscow Principality in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the northern borders of Iran, including the Caucasus region, have turned into a bloody battlefield between Russian, Iranian and Ottoman armies. These skirmishes continued until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when Iran lost vast regions of her territories through various treaties, with lands going to Russia, England or even Khanates of Kashghar, Khotan, Yerkent and beyond to China.<sup>1</sup> After the collapse of the former Soviet Union and the independence of various republics—specifically in former Iranian provinces, which were separated by the treaties of Gulestan, Turkmenchay and Akhal—a series of independence movements in Caucasia and the so-called Central Asian territories took place. These movements forced the Russian state to finally give up many of her former Iranian provinces in 1991, which were occupied in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the area of international relations,

the North Caucasus represents a strategically important zone. Its natural and mineral resources, the Baku-Novorossiisk pipeline, the undefined status of the Caspian Sea, and the de facto independence of Chechnya in 1996-1999, have all attracted the interests of outside powers.

### **Etymological Makeup**

The term *Chechenis* believed to be derived from the Iranian name for the Noxçi. It first occurs in Islamic sources written by Iranian scholars from the 8th century. According to popular tradition, the Russian term *Chechen* comes from the name of the village of Chechen-Aul, where the Chechens defeated the Russian army in 1732. The word *Chechen* however, occurs in Russian sources as early as 1692 and the Russians probably derived it from the Kabardian *Shashan*. (Jaimoukha, 2005. p 12)

### **A Glimpse into Chechen History**

Chechnya is a region in the North of Iran near the shores of the Caspian Sea and the South of Russia, along the Caucasian mountains. As part of the USSR, it was an autonomous republic (the Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Republic) within the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic, which stretched from Europe to the Far East in Asia, along the Sino-Japanese as well as Korean borders. While many former Soviet Republics such as neighboring Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia—which were under the suzerainty of Iran but invaded by Russia and subsequently fell under the jurisdiction of the USSR—claimed their independence after 1991, Chechnya was the only ethnic region within the larger Russian Republic to press on resolutely for sovereignty. When the attempted *coup d'état* occurred in Moscow in August 1991, Chechens came together in defense of *perestroika* and *glasnost*, but just three months later the republic faced the threat of Russian assault in response to elections that Moscow considered illicit. One thousand Russian paratroopers were sent to the region, but were immediately surrounded by Chechen militia as they landed. A ceasefire was declared and troops were sent back to Russia amidst great *fête* among Chechens, who believed this to be the commencement of a

long-hoped-for Chechen state independent from Russian control. For the next three years the region enjoyed *de facto* independence until December 1994 when Russian troops returned, this time in much greater numbers and with the full resources of a modern army. But the stubborn Chechen freedom fighters (many under the banner of Islam) fought to a deadlock; on 31 August 1996, the Khasavyurt Accords were signed and Russian troops withdrew (German 2003, p. 147), leaving Chechnya once again in a status of *de facto* independence. When Vladimir V. Putin replaced Boris Yeltsin, he promised to 'turn Russia into a strong state' (Evangelista 2002, p. 196). At the top of his list was to assert Moscow's influence over the regions, above all in the Land of Chechens. Responding to two incursions into neighboring Dagestan by Chechen freedom fighters, Russia responded by invading Chechnya in 1999, crushing the nationalist rebellion, destroying cities, killing innocent civilians, raping women<sup>2</sup>, and leveling villages to the ground. Today, perhaps 100–300 insurgents continue to stage infrequent attacks against Russian soldiers, but by and large Chechnya is now (once again) a part of Russia, treated as a colony in the classical sense of the term.

### **Iran, Chechnya and Colonial Historiography**

In western historiography we see a tendency to neglect the Iranian element in the makeup of the Caucasian region. For instance, when western analysts speak of the Russo-Iranian conflicts, they rarely mention Iran and instead refer to pseudonyms or fictitious designations, which were not in use during that time at all. Hank Johnston, for example, relies on Dunlop (1998), and thus reproduces the British style of historiographical scholarship on the question of 'Iranian Sovereignty on Caucasia'<sup>3</sup> approaching the Russo-Iranian wars in this fashion:

Several of these uprisings either coincided with or were in response to a ruthless Russian campaign against the Chechens between 1816 and 1827. This period represents the first stage of the Caucasus War, which lasted in various degrees of intensity from 1817 until 1864, and during which several other of the Muslim peoples of the Caucasus waged gazavat against Russia. General Alexsei Yarmolov was sent by

Alexander I to subdue the Chechens and for ciblyin corporate them into the Russian Empire. Yarmolov burned crops, slaughtered herds, sacked villages, massacred women and children, took them as slaves, and engaged in the forcible deportation of Chechens from northern lowland regions, which were more easily defensible, to the less fertile mountainous regions. In the long-term, these policies ensured continued resistance by driving Chechens into less accessible and socially more primitive areas where traditional tribes and clans were stronger. (Dunlop cited by Johnston, 2008. p 329)

Here we can see that Dunlop focuses on a time span which coincides exactly with the Russo-Iranian wars that resulted in the Gulestan Treaty, but neither Johnston nor Dunlop mentions the Iranian element in these wars; it is as though there was a country named Caucasia and Russia was waging war with it. Elsewhere, this line of historiography, which I term 'colonial historiography', is expressed in relation to Iran and Iranian people<sup>4</sup> in the Caucasian Provinces. Johnston's statement is an eloquent expression of such a colonial historiography. He argues that several of

"... these uprisings ... were against the Chechens between 1816 and 1827. This period represents the first stage of the Caucasus War, which lasted in various degrees of intensity from 1817 until 1864 ..." (2008. p 329).

Firstly, the period under discussion is exactly the time when the treaties of Gulestan and Turkmenchay were imposed on Iran and finally led to the treaty of Akhal between Iran and Russia, which led to the loss of Central Asia for good. Secondly, there is no Caucasus War recorded in history, as this is a designation by Russian historiographers who attempted to uproot the people by imposing various new identities on them. These identities were not based upon any organic historical development, but on imaginary colonial fabrications that suited colonial policies and schemes. Thirdly, there are no 'Caucasus Wars' but Russo-Persian wars, which led to the invasion of vast Iranian lands until the partial independence of some of the current Republics—such as Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and other republics in Central Asia. In sum, we can see multifarious colonialist discourses on this issue which,

regardless of being Russian or Euro-American, share the same pattern: namely, the removal of the Iranian element as well as the fabrication of scholarly historical paradigms based on 'Colonial Historiography' that result in the loss of Caucasian identity.

The complex mechanism of what could be termed as 'de-Iranization' and 'de-Islamization' was laid down from the very early stages of occupation, and has been beautifully explained by Tadeusz Swietochowski. He rightly believes that the invasion of Iran fits very well with the pattern of European colonial wars of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries—as those who were involved in the wars had a clear vision of how to uproot the people of these occupied lands. Still in the early...

“... stage of the conquest, in 1816, a Russian commander by the name of Marquise Philippe Paulucci penned down remarkably straightforward suggestions on how to deal with the peoples of the newly [occupied] lands [of Iran] ...” (1995, p 12).

Paulucci urged the Russian state administrators to prevent

“... them [i.e. the Iranian people in the occupied lands] absolutely from the possibility of links with ... Persia ...” (1995, p 12).

With the conquest of northern parts of Iran, Russia became the first European power to extend its rule over a part of the Muslim world. This area, situated on the rim of the Middle East and separated from Russia by a mountain range, was seen, by virtue of its geographical location, as a bridgehead for further expansion—as opposed to a region to be closely integrated with the Russian state. In fact, use of the term *colony* in reference to the Caucasian provinces of Iran gained acceptance among Tsarist officials, who took as their model the French rule of Algeria. (1995, p 12)

### **Sufi Islam, Iran and Chechnya**

When looking at the geography of the Caspian Sea, one could easily discern an interesting pattern where history and geography overlap. In

other words, the history of Sufism in Ingushetia, Dagestan, Chechnya and Kabardino-Balkaria is deeply intertwined with Gilan and the culture of Iran (as both Sufi masters in Chechnya belong to the Iranian schools of Irfan). Religious beliefs of the Muslims of Chechnya have two distinctive features: firstly, the predominance of the Hanafite Islam, and secondly, the distinct position of Sufism in the Chechen (and Ingush) society. Among the famous Sufi orders in Chechnya, are the Naghshbandieh order, which has been founded by Khajeh Bah'aldin Naghshbandi of Bokhara,<sup>5</sup> and the Qaderiyyeh order, which was founded by A'bdolghader Gilani.<sup>6</sup> It seems that Sufism has been very influential as a motivation for battle and resistance against the brutalization of Russians throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Chechens have never forgotten the heroic battles of Ghazi Muhammad, Sheikh Shamel, Kusha Hajji, Ali Beyk Hajji, Abdurrahman, Orun Hajji and many others. Thus, Islam (as a political force) and Sufism (as a spiritual source of intense solidarity) were always the chief motivational forces behind Chechen battle and allowed for the creation of formidable resistance against Russia, since the leaders of these battles were also the leaders of Sufi orders. Of course, at present the Sufi Orders in Chechen-Ingush regions are more multifaceted in character than before the treaties of Gulestan and Turkmenchay were imposed upon Iran by Russia. For instance, among the Qaderiyyeh Order, we can witness two main sub-orders: 1) Kunta Hajji and 2) Batal Hajji. Although they both belong to the same mystic school, socio-politically they display different orientations on significant questions in the contemporary era vis-à-vis Russian authorities. The acting head of Batal Hajji School (Sheikh Yakup) resides in Surkhakhi<sup>7</sup> in the Republic of Ingushetia and runs the order as a semi-independent mini-state within Russia. In addition, they follow strict rules in terms of marriage, diet, business and state. One example is that the followers of Batal Hajji School do not marry outside the order with other Muslims who belong to other walks of life. Of course, in recent years they have faced serious troubles in terms of genetic health (e.g. increase of mongolism) due to close intermarriages and for that reason the acting head has relaxed the rules for men. In other words, men within the order are allowed to marry non-Batal Hajji women but the women cannot marry non-Batal Hajji men. The other main school within

Qaderiyyeh order is the school of Kunta Hajji. The followers are mainly in Chechnya and Ingushetia but you may find them elsewhere in North Caucasus and Russia. They believe that their "*Pir*" (i.e. Kunta Hajji Kishiev) is alive and shall return "soon". There are interesting elements within this school, which bear a great resemblance to the belief-system of Shias in regard to the Twelfth Imam. As for the Naghshebanideh order, one could find them all over Caucasia and the oldest living sheikh of this school is Sheikh Osman, who is one hundred and six years old and resides in Surkhakhi in Ingushetia. He is a very learned mystic and speaks fluently in Arabic. However, there are complicated sets of rivalries between these schools and it is hard to find common ground. This has paved the way for the Russian intelligence services to use these people against each other since the separation of Caucasia from the body of the Islamic World.<sup>8</sup>

### **Chechen Resistance and the Geostrategical Dilemma of Russia**

The resistance front of Chechnya—which was inaugurated under the leadership of Johar Dodayev, former officer in the Soviet air force in the 1990s after the fall of USSR—was temporarily interrupted by a brutal military assault by Russia in 1994 and 1995, which left Grozny in rack and ruin. Chechens are not supported by Islamic states or OIC, even though it is obvious that this is one of the last anti-colonial movements of the twentieth century. Having said this, it seems that Russia tries to retain Chechnya at any price as:

1. The geostrategic location of Chechnya in the Caucasus region has deprived Russia of being the dominant power in the region and has brought about many security concerns for Russia.
2. Chechnya and Grozny have many other geostrategic factors, the absence of which makes Russia more vulnerable. For instance, we could mention the following cases: Terek river which is the main source of water for some parts of Dagestan and flows into the Caspian sea, originates in Chechnya, Sabalan railway to Makhachkala passes through Grozny, and this city is situated on the route of Rostov-Baku

and Astrakhan-Krasnodar railways and Black seas' shore Grozny became even more strategic after the construction of oil pipelines in the east of Caspian sea, although crisis in Chechnya has overshadowed the key role of this city in the transportation of oil from Baku to Russia and Europe but this has not made it insignificant for Russians.

3. The independence of Chechnya will trigger other furious independence movements among other separatist autonomous republics of Russia, such as Dagestan, Tataristan, Ingush, Northern Ossetia, Karachay and so on and so forth.

4. The hypothetical union of Chechnya and Dagestan could deprive Russia of some strategic opportunities in the Caspian Sea, which would undoubtedly have negative impacts upon Russia's interests in the region.

Therefore, Russia intends to retain Chechnya at any cost and the Chechen Islamic movement wants to actualize its political goals through independence from Russia; thus there is a bloody conflict in the region. It is in this context that the Chechen liberation movement has chosen to see in Ingushetia or Dagestan a repetition of the Chechen experience—not only as a stimulus for the international recognition of Chechnya but also as a route to achieve domination over the North Caucasus for Chechnya, and for Chechnya's acquisition of access to the Caspian and Black seas. Of course, the cases of Dagestan and Ingushetia require separate research, and shall be tackled in our upcoming paper.

### **Chechen Crises and Russian Security Paradoxes**

My fieldwork demonstrates clearly that the Kremlin is in a paradoxical position vis-à-vis the North Caucasian region due to its inability to fathom the dynamics of liberation movements, which are based on ethno-nationalism and religious solidarity that are defined against Russian totalitarian discourses of power and colonial suppressive apparatuses. I have outlined these paradoxes in the following fashion:



1. The Kremlin has left the North Caucasian question in the hands of 'Intelligence Forces of FZB'.
2. The relation between Russian forces of FZB and local people in Caucasia—except Christian Ossetians—is based on 'Subject-Object' relation, where FZB is the subject and Muslims are the object.
3. Russians have deserted the region and there is no sign of a Soviet melting-pot.
4. Intelligence forces are ill-equipped to deal with Islamic cultures. For instance, when local youth attend any mosque this is interpreted as a sign of extremism. By alienating the local people, they are inadvertently pushing non-militant Muslims toward militancy.
5. Within Russia, the mood is changing towards either tougher treatment of the 'Caucasian Problem' or a demand to separate Russia from Caucasus. Nationalist groups in Russia believe that the Kremlin is abusing (or even outright wasting) Russian resources on regions where the population is in fact, an enemy of the Russian State.
6. By militarizing the ground, Russia has lost the hearts of Muslims of Caucasia and beyond
7. There is a deep belief among local people who I interviewed that Russian forces are testing their various new weaponries on them. In other words, the distrust between both camps is so wide that it seems hard to find any common ground.
8. The most important factor in relation to Russo-Caucasian question is the inability of Russian rulers (Zapadnists, Slavophils, Left, Right, Nationalists, Liberals, Communists, Putinists or Medvedevians) to concede to the fact that Muslims in Caucasia see them as an occupying force In other words, Russia cannot be part of the process of conflict-resolution since they are perceived as the major factor in creating conflict in the region by the Caucasian nations.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The stories of these last territories have not been debated in details in Iranian diplomatic historiography yet. For more information on the state of these khanates and Iran see the work by Hossein Zamani (*The Problem of Marv in the Contemporary Iranian History*, 2005. p 82).

<sup>2</sup> An outstanding case in this regard is Colonel Yuri Budanov, who raped and killed an 18-year-old Chechen girl (Elza Kungayeva) during a Chechen conflict in 2000.

<sup>3</sup> On these colonial wars, which resulted in the separation of many Iranian lands during 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, one should read about the treaties of Gulestan, Akhal and Turkmenchay and Heart and see the vast regions which were invaded by both Russians and British. Sadly the narratives on these issues are mainly fabricated and far from objective historiography as far as Iran and Islam in Caucasia and Russia are concerned.

<sup>4</sup> One may object that these people are not of Iranian origin. I refer you to the Circassian historian Amjad Jaimoukha who argues that the people of Caucasia belong to the same stock as Kurds, who are the first that established Iran as a political unit and today make up an important constituent of existing Iranian nation.

<sup>5</sup> Sheikh Bah'aldin Naghshbandieh of Bokhara was an Iranian Sufi saint (717-791) who followed the path of Khajeh Yusuf from Hamedan (440-535) and Khajeh Abdol-Khalegh Ghajdovani (d. 575). Naghshbandieh Order spread very soon in Greater Khorasan by Ala al-Deen Attar (d. 802), Mohammad Parsa (d. 822), Yaghob Charkhi (d. 851) and Ubeidullah Ahrar (806-895). Ahrar was one of the most influential

sheikhs of this order during Teimurids who extended the sociopolitical dimensions of this order in a very powerful manner. (Araghi, 1975. p 9)

<sup>6</sup> Al-Syed Muhiyudin Abu Muhammad Abdal Qadir al-Gilani al-Hasani wal-Hussaini (470–561 AH) (1077–1166 CE) was an Iranian preacher, Sufi sheikh and the figurehead of the Qadiri Sufi order. He was born on a Wednesday the 10th Rabi at-Thani in 470 AH, 1077 CE, in the Persian province of Gilan (Iran) south of the Caspian Sea. (Trimingham, 1971)

<sup>7</sup> It is a small town about half an hour by private car from Magas, the tiny Capital of Ingushetia. Here you can find the mausoleum of Batal Hajji, who was a Sufi master in the Qadiri School. Near the mausoleum the local people have built a beautiful mosque and the residence of the present sheikh, who is the grandson of Batal Hajji, lies in this area. I met the Sheikh and spent a few days talking to them about different issues. One of the striking things I came across was the fact that this school identified itself with the Shia brand of Islam and insisted that the only reason they have hidden their Shiism is due to the hostile surrounding in the region. Sheikh Yakup who is in his seventies, told me that he has traveled to Qom, Mashahd, Najaf, Kerbela, and other holy shrines of Shia during the 90s. Another important issue that I came across in Surkhakhi is the rich library of Sheikh Yakup. There you can find more than 100 hand-written books in Persian, Turkish and Arabic, a fact which demonstrates that until 1916 (the date Batal Hajji passed away) Persian was a dominant language in the region. I myself analyzed many books that seemed to be written by Batal Hajji himself in Persian; experts should take a look and pass their judgments on the originality of these works. I was told that all of these books were hidden under the earth during the Communist era and just a few years ago Sheikh Yakup dared to take them out. I am still working on this issue and soon shall publish my last words on these questions in a separate study on Islam in Ingushetia.

<sup>8</sup> All the information provided here is based on the author's own fieldwork in Caucasia. The author lived among local people and conducted research as well as participated in Sufi ceremonies such as "Running Dance" among Ingush-Chechen order of Kunta Hajji during the summer of 2011. He is still working on these issues and the case is not closed yet. In this regard, there are issues such as cultural presence of Iran and the role of Shiism in the north Caucasian region which have not been debated in detail. Of course, there are studies on Shias in Darband and Dagestan, but researchers have not touched upon the role of Shiism among the Batal Hajji School as far as research findings demonstrate in this regard.