

James Dorsey and Yoav Karny

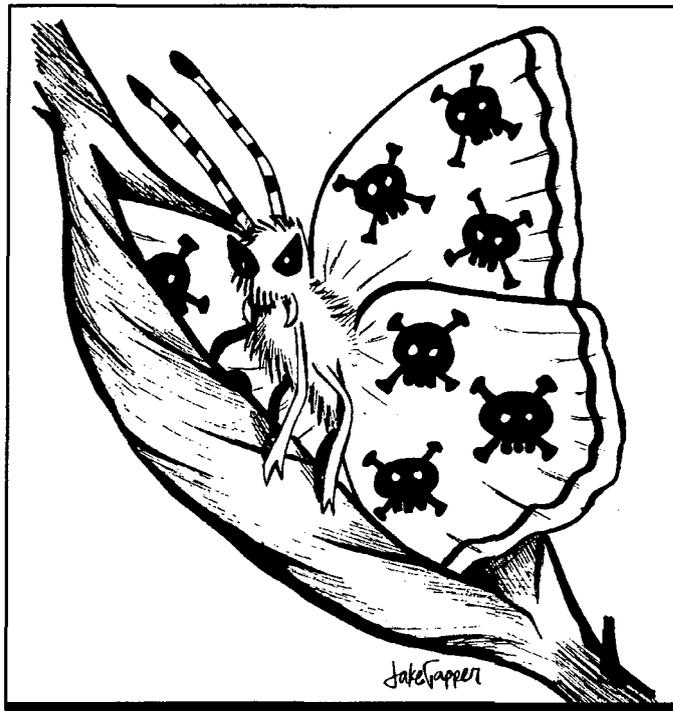
# New Players in the Middle East

*Welcome to the Caucasus, where a handful of firebrand leaders are vying to lead their nations to an independence they have not enjoyed since Czarist times—and reaching out to strange new allies.*

A short man in his late fifties, Yuri Shanibov hardly strikes one as Caucasia's most wanted man. His mild manners, cultured voice, and sense of history reflect his distinguished academic and legal career rather than his new-found status as a revolutionary determined to reverse 200 years of history. A wall-size map recalling the lost era of Soviet-inspired fraternal internationalism dominates his modest office in the North Caucasian resort of Nalchik. The map's politics contrast starkly with his rebel movement, the Confederation of North Caucasian Mountain Peoples, which is both a product and an engine of violent disintegration. As he explains his vision for the Caucasus, Shanibov's thick fingers move across the map in substitution of his battle-hardened warriors. "Give me a month," he says almost boastfully, "and I'll simply walk into Tbilisi."

Thousands have joined the ranks of Shanibov's Confederation as volunteers willing to die in an attempt to reclaim what was the divine property of a non-Slavic, largely Muslim population until Russian imperialism in the late eighteenth century raised its head. With Abkhazian seces-

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sionists today pushing Georgian troops out of a key Black Sea province linking Georgia with Russia, his troops now see an opportunity to redress perceived historic injustice. Grouping under one umbrella sixteen nations who often have only geography in common, they seek to carve out of Russia and Georgia a new Caucasian state that would stretch from the shores of the Caspian Sea to the estuary of the Don. Such a state would push Russia out of the Middle East and force her to retreat into her sixteenth-century

reclusion. It would also almost certainly redraw beyond recognition the boundaries of the Middle East and spark brutal ethnic conflicts across Eurasia.

Carefully shielded for much of this century from the outside world by Moscow, the Caucasus, whose resistance to the Russian occupation was the most violent the Czarist empire ever encountered, is today emerging from its cocoon. In its minuscule, often artificial autonomous republics, created by Stalin to mix up the races and weaken their sense of nationalism, romantic visionaries and self-serving opportunists plot national liberation. Among them, Shanibov is a prime contender to don the mantle of Imam Shamil, a nineteenth-century Muslim mystic and ascetic who still inspires Islamic militants across the Middle East and Central Asia. The leader of history's last North Caucasian state, Shamil would today be described as an Islamic fundamentalist.

Fighting the Russians for almost thirty years, he was legendary for his personal courage and uncompromising zeal and even earned the grudging respect of the Czar himself. He nearly succeeded in dragging Britain into a war to preempt Russian expansion into the Middle East, tantalizing European romantics in the process. His would-be successors are by and large atheists and agnostics, more at ease with the precepts of Kemal Ataturk than those of Ayatollah Khomeini. But Shamil's increasing posthumous popularity is an indication that history could as yet take strange twists if Caucasians indeed maintain unity and strengthen their international relations.

Russia is unlikely to cede control of the northern Caucasus as it did with the Ukraine and the Baltic states. Too much of its political and military thinking involves the preservation of the region as both a buffer zone and a launching pad. Too much of its modern literature is influenced by Caucasian images and landscapes. A land of towering mountains and epic legends, it was the Caucasus that inspired Mikhail Lermontov, an imperial army officer, to write *Hero of Our Time*, and eventually agree to a senseless duel that cost him his life. It was of the Caucasus that Aleksandr Pushkin wrote: "I know how to use a dagger—I was born in the Caucasus."

Endless attempts to resolve conflicts in the Caucasus—like those between Georgians and Abkhazians, Georgians and South Ossetians, North Ossetians and Ingush, and between Moscow itself and the Chechen—reflect mounting Russian concern about the region. Disagreement in November 1991 over the Caucasus heralded the conflict between Boris Yeltsin and diehard conservatives in Russia's parliament. The Caucasus was also the setting for Moscow's most bloody and futile attempts to stifle nationalism in the final days of the Soviet empire. Beyond merely failing, they gave birth to even more radical forms of nationalism such as that of deposed Georgian President Zviad Gamsakhurdia.

**B**uilt as a fortress against Imam Shamil's troops, Nalchik is now a main center of Pan-Caucasian agitation. From his second-floor office in the former Communist party headquarters there Yuri Shanibov runs his confederation and dispatches armed volunteers to help brothers and cousins throughout the region in need. It was in Nalchik last September that Russian security forces lost their nerve and arrested Shanibov under the cloak of darkness. Within days, supporters besieged the town's public buildings. Shanibov was mysteriously allowed to "escape," an exploit that earned him instant folk-hero status.

With Nalchik as its administrative center, Shanibov's

home state of Kabardin-Balkaria, a former Soviet autonomous republic, is populated primarily by Cherkess, a nation of handsome and fierce warriors who fought valiantly until their final defeat in 1863. Deceived and manipulated, they were persuaded to migrate to the domains of the Ottoman Sultan. Allowed to form a military caste, they fought the Sultan's wars, settled his rebellious frontiers, and at times massacred his disloyal subjects. They did so well in Bulgaria in the 1870s that a horrified British public called Gladstone out of retirement to teach the savages a lesson. Gladstone annexed Egypt and the Middle East never looked the same again.

Dispersed today over five Middle Eastern countries, the Cherkess often serve in rival armies. In Syria and Turkey they have penetrated the highest echelons of the armed forces while their kith and kin proudly are part of the Israel Defense Forces. The Cherkess renaissance in the Caucasus

is strongly felt in the diaspora, where many openly dream of a return. The comparison with the Jews is so obvious that their Arab diaspora speaks of Cherkess Zionism. They crisscross the Caucasus, pilgrims to the Old Country, still conversant in a language their ancestors spoke 150 years ago, some from Anatolian villages whose social structures

have remained intact ever since their exodus in the 1860s. Among the diaspora dreamers: a retired Syrian general offering his military expertise, a prominent Turkish banker, a young businessman from Jordan, a tourist from the Serbian-dominated province of Kosovo, and an ostentatious wheeler-dealer from Berlin sporting his old Mercedes in the dusty streets of Nalchik. They came from different corners of the world searching for their roots. All insisted that "we will return and, if need be, fight our way back."

**C**ompeting with Cherkess Nalchik to lead the Caucasus away from Russia and away from reality is Grozny. Named after Ivan the Terrible and even more militant and outspoken than Nalchik, Grozny is the capital of Chechniya, which unilaterally declared itself independent from Russia a year and a half ago. Its leader, maverick former Soviet air force general Dzhokar Dudayev, plays a key role in Yuri Shanibov's Confederation. Viewed as the Moammar Qaddafi of the Caucasus, Dudayev has threatened to send his supporters to blow up nuclear power stations in Russia if Moscow attempts to overthrow him. Dudayev's bluster is taken seriously in Moscow, where the Security Ministry, Russia's renamed KGB, believes that hundreds of Chechen agents "could organize terrorist acts on order from Grozny." Recently, a Russian newspaper compared the Chechen network with Narodnaya Volia, the revolutionary party that

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employed assassination and terror in its bid to overthrow the Czarist regime.

Just back from a visit to the Gulf, Dudayev sits on the ninth floor of Government House in the center of Grozny, the Dodge City of the Caucasus, amid his newly acquired Gulf paraphernalia: a Saudi flag with its Koranic inscription on his wall and a copy of a Saudi-owned London newspaper on his desk. A town of unfinished apartment blocks and decrepit oil refineries that boasts more imported Western cars than any other formerly Soviet city, Grozny has virtually no water and has been unable to repair its broken telephone system. "The Russians are encouraging the wars here to maintain control. That's why reforms are making little headway. It's Russia's fault. Russians and Georgians are the same. Shevardnadze is a dictator, no better than Saddam Hussein or Adolf Hitler," Dudayev thundered during our interview.

Wrapping himself in the cloak of Islam, Dudayev sees the wars in the Caucasus and in Bosnia-Herzegovina as a conspiracy to suppress the Muslims. "Russia is the chief conduit for anti-Islamic aggression," he declared last year. Together with the foremost Muslim cleric in the Caucasus, Dudayev issued a statement stressing "the need to unite all the Caucasian Muslims [into a force] capable of resisting the ideology which is being imported here."

The Caucasus could be called the Russian Balkans, were not the Balkans a model of rationality by comparison. A constant battle ground for three empires—the Russian, the Turkish, and the Persian—it has been a homeland for an unparalleled mosaic of nations, tribes, languages, and dialects. Pliny, the ancient historian, wrote of one Caucasian port city alone: "We Romans did business there with the aid of 130 interpreters." Villages, sometimes only a mile apart, couldn't communicate with one another prior to the Russian annexation. As late as 1912, a Russian governor-general of the Caucasus informed the Czar that the people of the Caucasus would "submit to cohabitation only under the influence of the Russian government, without which they would plunge into bloody rivalry."

But Russian pacification is unpopular in the Caucasus with Russia being everybody's favorite villain. Armenian horror stories of Russian betrayal are matched only by Azerbaijani tales of how Russia helped the Armenians. Perfidious Russia will never be forgiven by the North Caucasians for selling them out to the Georgians, who, in turn, will never forget how Russia stabbed them in the back. All of them have a point. Unwilling to lose another part of the empire and be forced to retire to their sixteenth-century borders, Russian politicians and generals are doing

their utmost to perpetuate Caucasian weaknesses, supplying arms to whoever will take them. At the same time, they present themselves as the only saviors capable of protecting the warring nations from each other's wrath and vengeance. The Caucasus is more than a precious piece of real estate. Its disintegration could give wrong ideas to other non-Slavic nationalities within the Russian Federation like Tatarstan and Bashkortostan, two Muslim and Turkic-speaking republics in central Russia. And Russians still remember the 1918-20 civil war in which the Caucasus served as a launching pad for both the Red and the White Armies. Widely ignored and under-reported, the northern Caucasus is but a part of the political equation.

No less crucial is the southern Caucasus, or Transcaucasus, where in 1987 the bells first started tolling for Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika.

Enmities, only thinly disguised under Soviet rule, have fully erupted in the last four years, tearing communities apart, doing away with notions of coexistence.

Nagorno-Karabakh, the impoverished, mountainous region at the heart of the Armenian-Azeri conflict, carries little practical significance, but is heavily

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loaded with symbolism. Controlled by Muslims for centuries and formerly part of the Azeri Khanate of Karabakh, it is seen by Armenians as the cradle of their civilization. Known in Armenian as "artzakh," or "homeland," it plays a role similar to that of Kosovo in Serbian national consciousness. Both are conflicts inspired by national myths and mythologies rather than politics. In this murky, transcendental world few are open to the dynamics of give-and-take peace negotiations. Felix Mamikonyan, Armenia's ambassador in Moscow, is one of many Armenians who boast a family tree with roots in Karabakh dating back to the twelfth century. Yet Armenians only recently became a majority in Nagorno-Karabakh. To disguise this, they have removed a memorial originally erected to commemorate the establishment last century of the first Armenian settlement in the region.

To many Armenians, the war over Nagorno-Karabakh is a struggle for national redemption. "We are fighting in Nagorno-Karabakh for the next generation, not this one," says Arkady Saakian, a gaunt, bearded 28-year-old former guerrilla leader who was crippled in the war. "When Moses took the Israelites out of Egypt, he walked them forty years through the desert until the generation with the slave mentality had died."

To the Azerbaijanis, never sure who they are and where they came from, the mountains of Karabakh constitute the battlefield on which they can reassert their identity. Denied the long tradition of statehood and nationhood enjoyed by

the Armenians and the Georgians, an Azerbaijani nation is already emerging in battle. War offers it the opportunity to define not only its enemies but first and foremost itself. Azerbaijan's emerging identity finds its macabre manifestation in the ever-expanding cemetery opposite parliament on Baku's Avenue of the Fallen. Almost daily, Azerbaijanis bury their war dead in Shi'ite funerals that send Baku into a frenzy. Inept handling of the war by successive Azerbaijani governments finally culminated in May in the fall of the last remaining Azerbaijani stronghold in Nagorno-Karabakh. Enough was enough. The old Communist nomenclatura in Baku was overthrown by a popular revolution, and within a month Abulfaz Elchibey, an austere intellectual and fierce nationalist, came to power. An oriental linguist by training, he vowed to liberate Karabakh come September. He never did, and the very ghosts he rode to power are now coming back to haunt him.

A constant source of internal and external instability, Karabakh deprives Azerbaijan of the chance to capitalize on its enormous oil wealth, and seek shortcuts to a market economy. It bleeds Armenia to death, and forces Armenians to queue for hours late, at night for meager bread rations. With no end in sight, the war provides foreign powers like Iran, anxious to expand its influence and break out of international isolation, with tempting but risky opportunities. Independent Azerbaijan is the world's only other Shi'ite nation. But it is also an example to Iran's own estimated 15 million Azeris, who may see it as their lever finally to escape Persia's embrace. Sipping tea in his presidential residence, President Elchibey reminds visitors that there is an "unwritten law" in the United States according to which people fighting for liberation should be encouraged. "If the Azerbaijanis in Iran struggle for their independence . . . they deserve to be supported," he says.

**A**cross town from the presidential mansion, a nonsense Turkish general follows from his country's newly established embassy Azerbaijan's poor conduct of the war. He files grim reports to his superiors in Ankara where concern is mounting that Caucasian instability could spill over into its own territory. A Turkish nightmare envisions alliances between odd and ominous bedfel-

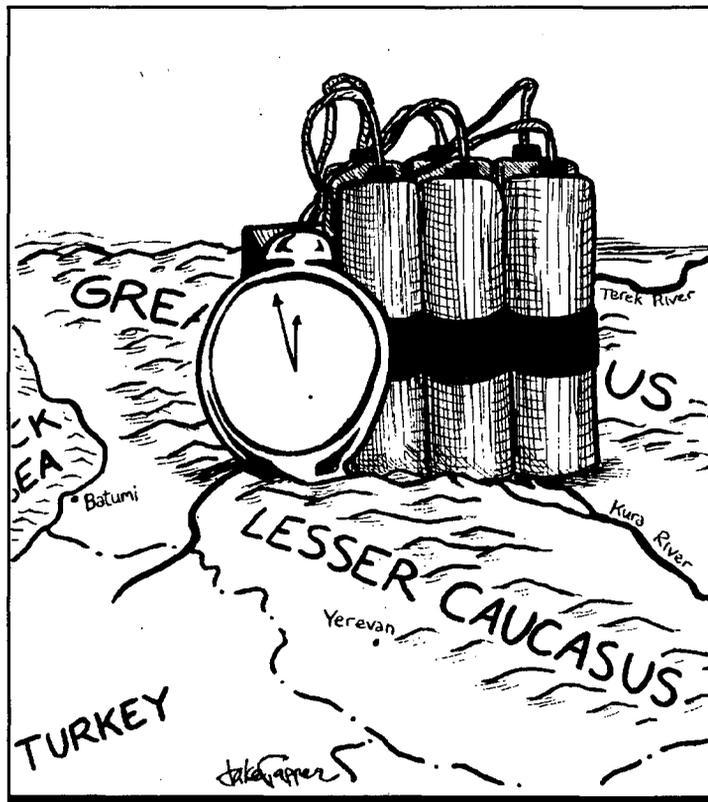
lows: Christian Armenia joining hands with Shi'ite Iran to undermine secular, Western-minded Turkey and/or Armenian revolutionary socialists collaborating with Marxist Kurds in pursuit of a common dream to push the Turks out of Eastern Anatolia, and carve it up between themselves.

The nightmare is not far-fetched, given Turkey's refusal to establish normal diplomatic and economic relations with Armenia. While we stayed in Armenia, three leaders of the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) engaged in a bloody eight-year guerrilla war against Turkey, visited Yerevan, not for the first time. At the same time, Iran is successfully luring with Armenian government support un- or under-employed Armenian physicists and nuclear

scientists to work in the Islamic Republic, and last year dispatched a member of the Iranian parliament to lay a highly symbolic wreath at the Iranian Genocide Memorial in Yerevan. "Iran is a very realistic country when it comes to its neighbors. They are isolated. We can help Iran break its isolation and establish ties with Europe," a senior Armenian official, Ruben Shugarian, told us in American-accented English. In return, Armenia expects Iran to help it offset a hostile geography, which renders the small country an easy prey to its neighbors.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Caucasus is rejoining the club of

Middle Eastern nations it was forced to leave in the middle of the nineteenth century. The focus of foreign policy in the region, the ethnic roots of its people, and the predominance of Middle Eastern specialists in government signal the return of once lost tribes. The Caucasus is certain to emerge in the next few years as a major political and military hub, an avid importer of Middle Eastern conflicts, and an eager exporter of its own wars and rifts. An increasingly frayed Russian army in the north, numerous militias and paramilitary groups in the center, and well-armed guerrilla groups and regular armies in the south are bound to coin a new sinister term in international relations, Caucasification, or the overthrow of an entire territorial order, a quick descent into disintegration and internecine warfare, and the inevitable involvement of foreign powers. The Caucasians seem well on their way to teaching the Balkans a lesson. □



Jeffrey Gedmin

# Comrade Slobo

*The introverted dictator who launched the war in former Yugoslavia and intimidated the likes of Cyrus Vance and Boutros Boutros-Ghali.*

Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic deplores the nationalism and extremism that has unleashed unspeakable savagery in the Balkans. At times he concedes, with gentle assurance, that “no one is blameless in Bosnia.” But more frequently he absolves the Serbs. “In all our history,” says Milosevic, “the Serbian people never waged any aggressive war.” Today they are “defending themselves and nothing more,” he insists. “We are victims of a cruel war.”

With much of the world now holding him culpable, it's no wonder Milosevic expresses gratitude for the “principled, impartial, and objective role that has been played by the United Nations . . . [and] by Mr. Cyrus Vance.” As Milosevic puts it, the peace proposals of U.N. envoy Vance “coincide entirely with the stand of the Republic of Serbia.”

It's hard to talk about the meteoric rise of Serbia's dictator without a look at his unwitting accomplices, and in this regard the U.N. peace team tops the list. As the United States dithered over Europe's newest turmoil and European leaders buried their heads in the sand, the worst thing that could have happened, happened—the United Nations was



entrusted to resolve the crisis. In the face of unrestrained Serbian aggression, first in Croatia, then in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Vance and his U.N. colleagues steadfastly rejected moves to allow Serbia's beleaguered neighbors to defend themselves. At least the Croats had their own means, albeit limited, to mount a defense. But by the logic that weapons only contribute to “a cycle of violence,” Vance and his co-negotiator from the European Community, former U.K. foreign secretary Lord David Owen, have campaigned hard against

modification of the international arms embargo, leaving the Slavic Moslem Bosnians at the mercy of their Serbian predators.

The embargo devastates the lightly armed Bosnians, whose initial passivity allowed Serb forces to build camps, roads, and gun deployments on hills overlooking targeted cities. While both sides import clandestinely, the Bosnians, with a handful of artillery pieces and tanks, some mortars and shoulder-fired rocket launchers, face Serb commands who have been the principal beneficiaries of the Yugoslav armed forces' matériel and equipment.

Vance's friend Boutros Boutros-Ghali, the Egyptian diplomat in charge of the United Nations, has followed a strategy predicated on the belief that Milosevic can be enticed into peace by concessions. In late December Boutros-Ghali was pleading with the Security Council to

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