

## The Return of Islamic State Fighters

### THE IMPACT ON THE CAUCASUS AND CENTRAL ASIA

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The devastating civil war in Syria and the long-standing turmoil in Iraq have been magnets for jihadists (and aspiring jihadists) from the Caucasus and Central Asia. No sooner had a civil war erupted in Syria in 2011 than militant Islamists from post-Soviet states began flocking there. More recently, some have also made their way to Iraq to fight on behalf of the ultra-radical Islamic State jihadist organization, which over the past year and a half has gained control of large swaths of territory in both Syria and Iraq.

Estimates of the number of fighters who have gone from the Caucasus and Central Asia to Syria and Iraq vary widely. The numbers cited by the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) and Internal Affairs Ministry (MVD) have fluctuated wildly over time and are often highly inflated. Western security officials have publicly indicated that many hundreds—and probably more than 1,000—from Russia’s North Caucasus region, more than 200 from the South Caucasus (Azerbaijan and Georgia), and at least several hundred from Central Asia (mostly Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan) have fought in Syria and Iraq.

The influx of these jihadists has been a boon for Islamic State. Over the past year, most of the leading Islamic fighters from the Caucasus and Central Asia have sworn allegiance (*bay’at*) to Sheikh Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of Islamic State. Some of the jihadists from these areas have already returned home and joined underground terrorist groups dedicated to Islamic State, and many more will be coming back to their home regions within the next year or two.

The return of battle-hardened mujahedin has already begun to cause major problems for the societies in which they settle. In the North Caucasus, which has been plagued by violent instability and terrorism ever since the end of Russia’s first war in Chechnya

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(1994-1996), the return of large numbers of jihadists is apt to destabilize communities anew and fuel the radical Islamic terrorist groups that have operated in Dagestan, Chechnya, and other republics under the broad auspices of the Caucasus Emirate (CE), a coordinating body for jihadists that was formed in October 2007 to oversee operations in six main provinces (*vilayats*).<sup>2</sup> Although Chechnya, which was placed under the CE's Nohchicho *vilayat*, has been much more tranquil in recent years than in the early 2000s, a sizable influx of radicals who fought for Islamic State will likely dispel the uneasy calm of the past two years and possibly spark a return to large-scale warfare.

In Azerbaijan and Georgia's Pankisi Gorge, Islamist fighters returning from the conflicts in Syria and Iraq will be fewer in number than in the North Caucasus, but they will be of sufficient quantity to form the core of a wider jihadist movement.

In Central Asia, the return of Islamic fighters from Syria and Iraq could be profound even if states in the region take steps to counter the threat (something they have often claimed to do in the past while actually engaging in broader repression against political opponents). At a time when political successions to the long-standing rulers in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan—both of whom have been in office for nearly three decades—may soon be under way, the Islamic militants returning to these countries from Syria and Iraq will have an especially volatile milieu in which to work. Similarly, in Tajikistan, where discontent with the repressive, authoritarian rule of President Emomali Rahmon is a potential source of violent instability, the roughly 300 Tajiks who have fought in Syria on behalf of Islamic State could wreak havoc at home.

The problem for Central Asia will be compounded by a potential spillover from the North Caucasus, as happened during the second Russian-Chechen War (1999-2009). Jihadists who want to set up an Islamic caliphate in the Caucasus are intent on extending their domain well into Central Asia, and they will undoubtedly seek to join forces in this effort with Uzbek, Kyrgyz, Tajik, and other fighters in Central Asia who have pledged allegiance to Islamic State.

### **The Problem in the North Caucasus**

In recent years, the Caucasus Emirate and its offshoots have been linked to Islamic terrorist plots for attacks overseas, including in Germany, Belgium, Denmark, the United Kingdom, the Czech Republic, the United States, Turkey, and Azerbaijan. Although nearly all of these plots were thwarted, the temptation for CE fighters to operate outside the borders of the Russian Federation has persisted.

In particular, the warfare in Syria and Iraq has been deeply alluring for North Caucasus mujahedin, especially those who are in danger of being tracked down and killed by

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<sup>2</sup> Only five (and mostly four) of these *vilayat* organizations have been active.

Russian security forces if they stay in or near their home regions. Because of the Russian government's staunch political and military backing of Bashar al-Assad's forces in Syria, many of the jihadists believe that the overthrow of Assad will deal a humiliating blow to President Vladimir Putin and his regime. In addition, the Islamist fighters from the Caucasus and Central Asia have viewed both Syria and Iraq as key battlegrounds in the larger struggle to establish an Islamic caliphate in the Caucasus and surrounding regions and to reassert Sunni hegemony over the current Shia-dominated governments in those two countries. Thus, a confluence of local and international considerations, combined with the online and direct exhortations of militant Islamic figures, has motivated jihadists from the Caucasus and Central Asia to become frontline fighters in Syria and Iraq.

Chechens and others from the North Caucasus who have embarked on the hazardous, difficult journey to Syria (usually via Azerbaijan and Turkey) to fight against Assad's regime have joined a variety of Islamist guerrilla groups there, including Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar (JMA), which is the only group affiliated with the CE. JMA, led by Salahuddin al-Shishani (né Feyzullah Margoshvili), consists of Chechens and others from the North Caucasus as well as some radicalized Crimean Tatars. JMA is based in Aleppo Province and has been deeply involved in the fighting there.

Over time, however, Chechens and other North Caucasus fighters have distanced themselves from the CE, which they increasingly have come to see as a parochial and ineffective organization, and have realigned themselves with what they consider to be more prestigious and dynamic groups, above all Islamic State. The dramatic rise of Islamic State during the conflicts in Syria and Iraq has been a powerful source of inspiration for Chechen and Dagestani militants, who had earlier been disaffected by what they saw as the impotence of the CE (particularly after the Emirate failed to make good on its repeated threats to attack the 2014 Olympics in Sochi) and the lack of meaningful opportunity to wage jihad in the North Caucasus. Fighting in Syria has been a vicarious means of keeping up their struggle for an Islamic caliphate at home.

By all accounts, the fighters from the North Caucasus who have sworn allegiance to Islamic State, especially the Chechens, have demonstrated formidable combat prowess and have been an important factor in the organization's success. In numerous battles, Chechen units have played lead roles and have confronted Assad's forces head-on, as in JMA's seizure of the key town of Handarat, west of Aleppo, and several other Syrian towns in March and April 2015. One of the leading field commanders in Islamic State, Abu Umar al-Shishani,<sup>3</sup> is the son of a Chechen mother and Georgian father and has long identified himself as Chechen. His reputation for fearlessness and his military

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<sup>3</sup> Abu Umar al-Shishani is the nom de guerre of Tarhan Tayumurazovich Batirashvili. Henceforth I will use the noms de guerre of mujahedin commanders and include their real names in parentheses.

prowess have enabled him to rise to the top level of Islamic State, where he has helped to promote other fighters from Chechnya and Dagestan.

Another Chechen, Ahmed Chataev, is one of the leading military recruiters and trainers for Islamic State. Chataev fought against Russian federal forces in both wars in Chechnya and in recent years lost his right arm and foot while battling Russian security police. Since mid-2014, he has recruited large numbers of fighters from the North and South Caucasus to join the ranks of Islamic State. Largely because of his role, the Pankisi Gorge in Georgia has become a major transit route for jihadists who want to travel to Syria to fight on behalf of Islamic State.

The links between Chechen fighters and Islamic State hold increasing potential for a new bout of violent destabilization in Chechnya. This became apparent in December 2014 when guerrillas from the Nohchicho *vilayat*, acting on orders from *vilayat* leader Emir Hamzat (né Aslan Byutukaev), provoked fierce clashes with security forces and police in Grozny, killing at least 25 people and wounding nearly 40. Shortly thereafter, all of the leading commanders of the Nohchicho *vilayat*, including Emir Hamzat, publicly shifted their allegiance from the CE to Islamic State, a move that was denounced by the CE. Similarly, several leading commanders of the Dagestan *vilayat*, which until that time had been the most active and effective of the CE *vilayats*, renounced their allegiances to the CE and pledged their oath of *bay'at* to Islamic State and al-Baghdadi. Spurning the complaints of the CE, the former commanders of these two *vilayats* have been attempting to organize Islamic State fighters returning from Syria into a cohesive, highly disciplined force that can eventually precipitate a full-fledged civil war in the North Caucasus and nearby regions à la Syria.

The Russian security forces' success in killing the leader of the CE, Emir Ali Abu Muhammad al-Dagestani (né Aliashab Kebekov), in an April 2015 raid ordinarily would have been a major achievement for the counterinsurgency campaign. But at a time when defections from the CE to Islamic State are occurring and when lines of authority are in doubt, the death of al-Dagestani was much less meaningful and, ironically, may even have been counterproductive. To the extent that al-Dagestani's death has accelerated the decline of the CE relative to Islamic State, the gains for Russian security forces are likely to be pyrrhic. A rump CE is still left and can still wreak havoc in the North Caucasus, but meanwhile Islamic State will enjoy new opportunities to recruit commanders and fighters who had formerly committed their *bay'at* to al-Dagestani and the CE.

The new head of the CE, Emir Abu Usman al-Gimravii (né Magomed Suleimanov), had earlier been one of the top officials in the CE's Dagestan *vilayat* and had long been one of the closest associates of al-Dagestani. On the one hand, these traits can work to the benefit of the CE by ensuring a high degree of continuity in the Emirate's functions, thus possibly helping to prevent further wholesale defections to Islamic State. On the other hand, the very fact of continuity could well be detrimental. Because one of the major

factors spurring defections from the CE to Islamic State has been the perception that the Emirate under al-Dagestani was ineffective and that a more dynamic alternative is needed, the transition to al-Dagestani's closest aide might simply hasten the shift of loyalties to Islamic State. At a minimum, the appointment guarantees that mujahedin forces from the North Caucasus will be sharply split between the CE and the Islamic State.

### **The Problem in the South Caucasus and Central Asia**

Jihadists from the South Caucasus and Central Asia who have gone to Syria to fight against Assad's regime have followed roughly the same trajectories as their counterparts from the North Caucasus. By now, most of the mujahedin from the South Caucasus and Central Asia who are fighting in Syria and Iraq are doing so on the side of Islamic State, not al-Qaeda. Commanders of Islamist guerrilla units (*jamaats*) in these regions have increasingly looked to Islamic State as the most desirable source of ideological, military, and financial support. The recruitment efforts in Georgia's Pankisi Gorge by Chataev, who has also recruited actively in Azerbaijan, have brought Georgians and Azerbaijanis as well as Chechens and Dagestanis to the side of Islamic State. The inspiration provided by Umar al-Shishani has extended throughout the Caucasus and Central Asia, providing a further boost for Islamic State in its rivalry with al-Qaeda.

The decision in the spring of 2015 by the emir of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), Usman Ghazi, to pledge the loyalty of his group to Islamic State, and Ghazi's subsequent announcement in July 2015 that the IMU (the largest and most effective Islamist guerrilla organization in Central Asia) had been fully incorporated into Islamic State, highlight the potential dangers in the region. So too did the defection in the spring of 2015 of one of the highest-ranking Tajik special forces commanders, Colonel Gulmurod Halimov, to Islamic State. When Halimov surfaced in Syria in May 2015, he denounced Tajik President Rahmon and vowed to spread Islamic State influence into Tajikistan.

Often in the past the regimes in Central Asia have been wont to exaggerate the threat from Islamic extremists in order to justify repression and authoritarian rule. Some abuses of this sort will undoubtedly continue, but that should not cause analysts to discount the emerging threat. The return of fighters who joined forces with Islamic State does pose real dangers in the region.

### **Conclusions**

The inroads made by Islamic State into the ranks of jihadists in the Caucasus and Central Asia since November 2014 have been little short of astonishing. This development marks a big setback for al-Qaeda. The CE, from the time it was founded in 2007, has always operated in close alignment with al-Qaeda, which for nearly two

decades has been seen as the organization of choice for Islamist fighters. However, the split between al-Qaeda and Islamic State—a split that began in 2005 during the war against U.S. forces in Iraq and that grew much wider after the start of the civil war in Syria in 2011—has resulted in a fierce competition for the loyalties of jihadists from the North Caucasus and nearby regions. Until late 2014, al-Qaeda’s position with the CE seemed relatively secure, but the large-scale defections that occurred in late 2014 and early 2015 and the escalating tensions between Islamic State and al-Qaeda (especially after the proclamation of a worldwide Islamic caliphate by al-Baghdadi in late June 2014, a step condemned by al-Qaeda) suggest that efforts to promote unity among mujahedin in the Caucasus and Central Asia will be of no avail for a long time to come.

The ascendance of Islamic State among jihadists from the former Soviet Union raises troubling questions for Russia and other post-Soviet states—especially Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. The radical Islamists who are fighting for Islamic State and other jihadist organizations in Syria will eventually return home, where they will undoubtedly seek to wage a similar struggle in support of Islamist goals. A recruitment video featuring Abu Jihad (né Islam Seit-Umarovich Atabiev), who is originally from the North Caucasus republic of Karachay-Cherkessia and now works with Umar al-Shishani in attracting mujahedin from the North Caucasus, conveys the message that waging jihad on behalf of Islamic State in Syria will facilitate a renewed struggle in the Caucasus. Online appeals by a popular Islamist preacher from Dagestan, Nadir Medetov, who joined Islamic State in Syria in late May 2015 after fleeing house arrest in Russia, and the deadly clash that erupted in early June 2015 between police in Dagestan and Suleiman Zainalobinov, a former guerrilla for the CE’s Dagestan *vilayat* who shifted his loyalties to Islamic State when fighting in Syria, underscore this point.

The options for countering the threat from Islamic State returnees will be considerably more difficult than the major efforts the Russian security forces have undertaken over the past sixteen years to combat guerrillas and uproot terrorist networks in the North Caucasus. The CE is linked with al-Qaeda, but the amount of weaponry and financial support it has received is meager. By contrast, jihadists aligned with Islamic State have already indicated their desire to rely on the organization’s ample funding and weaponry.

There may be little way to eliminate the threat in the near term, but the greatest potential will come through efforts to exploit the conflict between fighters aligned with the CE and those who have sworn allegiance to Islamic State. The groups compete not only in recruiting jihadists but also in collecting taxes (*zakat*). Recent comments by Putin and by his chief envoy to the North Caucasus, Sergei Melikov, suggest that the Russian authorities are only beginning to think along these lines.

Ongoing tensions over Ukraine might prevent cooperation between the United States and Russia in confronting Islamic State, but on this issue the two countries clearly have

common interests. Unless all the affected governments make a vigorous and concentrated effort to take advantage of the split and to implement a wide range of measures that can reduce the appeal of Islamic radicalism, returning jihadists aligned with Islamic State will be able to cause mayhem at home.

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