

The “Islamic State” as a Security Problem for Russia

THE NATURE AND SCALE OF THE THREAT

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From the late 2000s, international attention to links between the North Caucasus and the global jihadist movement gradually waned. It has recently resurfaced, however, primarily due to the presence of militants from Russia in the ranks of the “Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant.” Russia’s policy on the “Islamic State” (IS) is driven by a variety of interests, including those related to its Syria policy and its troubled relations with the West. Russia also has a degree of domestic security concerns about IS, taking into consideration that much of the fragmented, violent underground in the North Caucasus has already shifted its ideological loyalty to it. Jihadist returnees’ potential to reactivate the insurgency could become an additional complicating factor in this region. They may also find a foothold elsewhere in Russia.

Russia and the Islamic State

Since 2011, there has been a continuing downward trend in Islamist terrorism of North Caucasian origin. Overall levels of violence in the region decreased by half in 2014 alone. Nonetheless, international attention to the region has recently increased due to the presence of militants from the North Caucasus and other Russian regions on Iraqi and Syrian battlefields. These fighters have joined the ranks of IS as well as other militant Islamist groups.

There has been a tendency among observers to disproportionately highlight the role of North Caucasian militants in IS activities. But there have been more jihadists joining the movement from the Middle East, other Muslim states, and even from Western Europe than from Russia. Moreover, a significant proportion of “North Caucasians” or “Chechens” in IS are in fact émigré militants from Turkey and other Middle Eastern states, the South Caucasus, and Europe.

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More recently, an opposite international tendency to downplay Moscow's genuine concerns about the IS phenomenon has been gaining ground. This is typical of interpretations of Russia's unusually intense diplomatic activity that has stressed the challenge of jihadist groups in the Syria-Iraq context for the past few years and Moscow's major upgrade of its military and security support to Syria and Iraq, including its airstrike campaign in Syria that began at the end of last month.

In the end, the importance of Russia's genuine domestic security impulse in shaping Moscow's approach to the problem should not be discounted, but neither should the real scale of threat posed to Russian security by IS be hyped beyond reason. IS does pose certain challenges to Russia, but there are also limits to these challenges.

The "Pacification" of the North Caucasus

After the Second Chechen War of the 2000s, foreign radical Islamist influences declined in Russia as most foreign jihadists shifted to other hotspots. Since then, the North Caucasus has not attracted many new outsiders. In 2012, presidential envoy to the North Caucasian Federal District Aleksandr Khloponin [estimated](#) that just ten percent of funding for violent activity in the region came from foreign sources.

This decline in foreign influence coincided with, and largely stemmed from, the gradual pacification of Chechnya. This, in turn, resulted from major splits within the insurgency between jihadist and traditionalist ethno-confessional forces, the resulting rise of local anti-jihadist militias, and the Russian government's efforts to promote these forces via a policy of "Chechenization" and a massive disbursement of reconstruction assistance. Russia was able to reduce the problem to a relatively peripheral one, albeit at a high security, financial, human rights, and political-administrative cost. It also had to tolerate a deviation from the Russian legal system and outsource a significant degree of sovereignty.

The relative pacification of Chechnya was paralleled by a spread of lower-scale violence across the broader region. Low-intensity conflict simmered in Chechnya, but its center of gravity shifted to other North Caucasian republics. This more fragmented and non-linear violence has been less deadly and intense than that seen in the Chechen wars, but it is elusive and frequently recurs.

Russia's main security response to such violence has been containment, keeping it at a relatively low level. A more decisive strategy to "wipe out" the insurgency would be costly and counterproductive given underlying causes of instability and violence. These include deeply entrenched governance problems linked to predominantly patron-client systems, a lack of integration with the rest of Russia, corruption, and problems of socioeconomic development (despite a few emerging "islands" of growth). In these areas, it may take decades for major progress to be obtained.

The North Caucasus and the Islamic State

Against this backdrop, Russia has a genuine interest in ensuring that the current degree of stabilization, which has come at a very high price, is not distorted or reversed by new destabilizing links. The main destabilizing links today are transnational and primarily related to the Syrian-Iraqi front and especially to the rise of IS.

These pose several types of security challenges with regard to the North Caucasus. Of immediate concern has been the outflow of fighters to Syria and Iraq from the North Caucasus and, to a lesser extent, elsewhere. These were spotted fighting in Syria in affiliation with the radical jihadist al-Nusra front and other militant groups even before the “Islamic State of Iraq” spread to Syria and renamed itself the “Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant” in 2013. Since then, fighters from Russia in Syria and Iraq have become more numerous and active in various groups that aligned with or pledged loyalty to IS, including Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar (JMA, or Army of Emigrants and Supporters).

The data should be treated with caution, but the trend is clear. By official accounts, the number of fighters from Russia went from [300-400 in Syria](#) as of September 2013, to 800 in Syria and Iraq combined in 2014, [to 1,700 in Iraq](#) alone in early 2015. By some accounts, the number of militants from Chechnya may be only about [150](#).

IS needed North Caucasian militants primarily because of their fighting skills and experience, as well as their relative autonomy from local clans which increased their operational flexibility. Militants themselves have been attracted by the prospect of fighting at the cutting edge of global jihadism for a territorially-based and well-funded Caliphate, rather than operating as a marginalized underground under rigid security pressure on the periphery of a large and functional state with a minority Muslim population.

It is not just militants who have been attracted to IS. In addition to being at present the world’s most lethal terrorist group, the IS is an unprecedented radical Islamist state- and society-building experiment. It has sought not only to manage basic tasks of governance but also to spearhead a transnational migration and settlement project: the “Caliphate” must be peopled and is “marketed” as the “promised land” for all disenchanting Muslims, including civilians, women, and families. Disturbingly, women may make up [15 percent](#) of all those heading from the North Caucasus to areas controlled by radical Islamists in Syria and Iraq.

For Russia domestically, the main problem has not yet been the engagement of North Caucasian jihadist returnees in active violence back home. From 2014 through March 2015, at least 48 criminal cases were opened in the North Caucasian Federal District against militants, but these were mainly against individuals still fighting in Syria and

Iraq. At least six returnees that were convicted were [charged](#) with taking part in the fighting in the Middle East, not for fomenting local violence.

Of greater note has been the tendency of local insurgency commanders and mini-jamaats (cells) in the North Caucasus to pledge support for IS. This has had controversial effects on the Islamist underground. It has stimulated new splits and struggles for influence within the Caucasus Emirate (CE). The CE leadership even expressed reservations about fighters leaving for Syria and Iraq, insisting that it diverted manpower from the local insurgency (and, it should be added, diminished their own control and clout). Such internal fractures further weakened local militants linked to the CE and facilitated for authorities the elimination of new CE leader Aliazkhab Kebekov in April 2015 (who succeeded its founder Doku Umarov after the latter's confirmed death). At the same time, those groups and commanders who declare loyalty to IS are also not immune from internal tensions and splits.

So far, the return en masse of jihadists wreaking havoc within Russia is more a prospect than a reality, but it does remain a matter of concern. While it is almost by default assumed that those who return may wish to set up camp in the North Caucasus and try to reactivate the fragmented underground there, the Russian government's containment strategy and concomitant security pressures in the region impose serious limits on such a backflow.

Beyond the North Caucasus

For that matter, IS influence and publicity in Russia can be traced beyond the North Caucasus. While the flow of Russian fighters to Syria and Iraq has been dominated by militants of North Caucasian origin, it has also included [radical Muslims from the Volga region](#), the Urals, and elsewhere. This underscores a relatively recent phenomenon that may not yet have developed into a major trend but deserves particular attention in light of the new transnational influences on and connections of radical Islamists in Russia.

That phenomenon is the emergence of autonomous, often self-generating, radicalized Islamist cells and individuals among non-North Caucasian Muslims, and even ethnic Russian and non-Russian converts to Islam. This process affects only small segments of Russia's large native Muslim population and usually has no direct link to the North Caucasian context or agenda. The most high-profile (if rare) examples of this include growing numbers of Hizb ut-Tahrir followers in the Urals and the rise of a predominantly Salafist Tatar village, Belozerye, in the Mordovian republic. Such radicalization is increasingly occurring among urban reasonably-educated middle class youth, including young women.

This radicalization does not always or necessarily take violent forms, but it does create the setting and pool for prospective members to later join or be recruited into violent

activities at home or abroad. Some local Islamists who become radicalized into violent extremism may be linked to, and act alongside, their North Caucasian counterparts (for example, a Russian convert was involved in the preparation of the October 2013 bombing in Volgograd). Others display no direct link to the North Caucasian context or agenda. In many respects, this type of cell appears to more closely resemble self-generating jihadist cells in Europe than it does the “forest fighters” of the North Caucasian underground.

Islamist “mini-cells” not mired in the North Caucasian context (with its low-intensity conflict and specific political and sociocultural dynamics) are more likely to think in broader supraregional and transnational terms, set more universalist goals, and develop an interest in the ideology and agenda of “global” versions of jihadism. They often appear to have a better grasp of the transnational jihadist propaganda that is increasingly spread through modern information and communication channels and involves more transnationally-minded popularizers and preachers. One of these was the native Siberian convert to Islam, Sayid Buryatski, who made a point of reaching out to new audiences, especially educated urban youth and young women, and was killed in 2010.

In light of these developments, there may be as much a demand for potential jihadist returnees elsewhere in Russia as in the North Caucasus. Much like their Western counterparts—and in sharp contrast to North Caucasian militants—these newly-radicalized mini-cells and individuals across Russia exhibit a major mismatch between high ideological ambition and limited capacity and skill to carry out acts of violence and terrorism. This is the gap that seasoned jihadist fighters, if they manage to return from the Middle East to Russia, may help bridge.

Is Russia More or Less at Risk than Europe?

The mobilizing potential of IS as a magnet for foreign jihadists has been unprecedented. It already [exceeds](#) the scale of flow of foreign militants who took part in the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan in the 1980s. Accordingly, the destabilizing effect of IS-related return flows could also be higher. Even so, existing data on jihadist fighters of Western European origin have shown that only [one out of nine jihadists](#) who returned to their home countries engaged in violent activity again. Although this data refers to the period before the rise of IS, this dynamic is unlikely to radically change for the states of Europe, nor is it likely to be any different for Eurasia.

The argument that this percentage should be higher for Russia due to the fact that, in contrast to Western states, it still has an ongoing low-intensity conflict in one of its own regions is balanced out by other specifics of the case. There are fundamental differences between Muslims in Russia and Western Europe. One is the fully indigenous and integrated nature of Russia’s large core Muslim community. There are also more

temporary and passing advantages, such as the absence to date of any tendency among the millions of Muslim labor migrants to Russia, especially from Central Asia, of major ideological, political, or religious radicalization. This is typical for any first generation of migrants largely preoccupied with economic survival but can change or reverse later when it comes to the challenge of integrating subsequent generations of migrants in Russia. Finally, the generally stricter level of Russian domestic security controls and tougher and more repressive anti-extremist policies should discourage many potential returnees from violence.

Conclusion

The return of even a limited number of jihadists from Iraq and Syria can pose a security challenge to Russia. If they go to the North Caucasus, they would likely serve as just one complicating or destabilizing factor in the region. If they were to go elsewhere in Russia, even a few returnees could help fill a critical gap among radicalizing cells with more universalist agendas between the intent to carry out acts of violence or terrorism and the capacity to do so. This could spur Islamist terrorist attacks of a new type that are not necessarily related to the North Caucasus. No less worrisome is the broader ideological influence of IS: not only its military successes and propaganda but its efforts to build a “physical” territorially-based caliphate for the *here and now* can have an impact, even if it is one that only appeals to very few of Russia’s Muslims.

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