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## The Nature and Sources of Terrorist Threat in Russia AN “ARMED UNDERGROUND” OR ISIL?

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Mariya Omelicheva<sup>1</sup>  
*National Defense University*

Lawrence Markowitz<sup>2</sup>  
*Rowan University*

The 2018 FIFA World Cup shifted the attention of terrorism watchers to Russia. In advance of the tournament, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) launched an extensive social media campaign calling for attacks on the sporting event in retaliation for Russia’s intervention in Syria. Since 2015, ISIL has [claimed](#) responsibility for multiple terrorist incidents against Russian interests at home and abroad. Initially targeting security and law enforcement forces in the North Caucasus, terrorist attacks spread deeper into Russia’s heartland prompting Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev to [declare](#) ISIL the gravest national security threat. At the same time, Russia’s large migrant populations (and concurrent trends of marginalization, discrimination, and alienation of migrant workers) have turned the country into a principal target for ISIL recruitment for terrorist violence in Russia’s homeland and abroad.

Some observers have concluded, therefore, that the terrorist threat in Russia has mutated from a localized and homegrown problem into an ISIL-inspired international one. Drawing on a mix of quantitative data and interviews with over 20 experts in the North Caucasus, this memo finds that such depictions of terrorist incidents as an ISIL-inspired jihad misconstrue the complex nature of terrorist violence in the country. The majority of terrorist attacks in the Russian Federation remain homegrown and localized, targeting security forces, business interests, and government agencies in the republics of the North Caucasus. Misdirected by a preoccupation with terrorist violence as ISIL-linked, the Russian government’s “hard” counterterrorism measures in the run-up to the 2014

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<sup>1</sup> [Mariya Y. Omelicheva](#) is Professor of National Security Strategy at the National War College of the National Defense University. *Disclaimer:* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author(s) and are not an official policy or position of the National Defense University, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

<sup>2</sup> [Lawrence P. Markowitz](#) is Professor of Political Science at Rowan University.

Olympic Games and, again, in advance of the 2018 FIFA tournament have done little to mitigate its causes. On the contrary, Russia's forceful counterterrorism tactics ignore the underlying sources of the terrorist threat in the country and may galvanize the very forces it avows to eliminate.

### **Metamorphosis of Terrorism in Russia?**

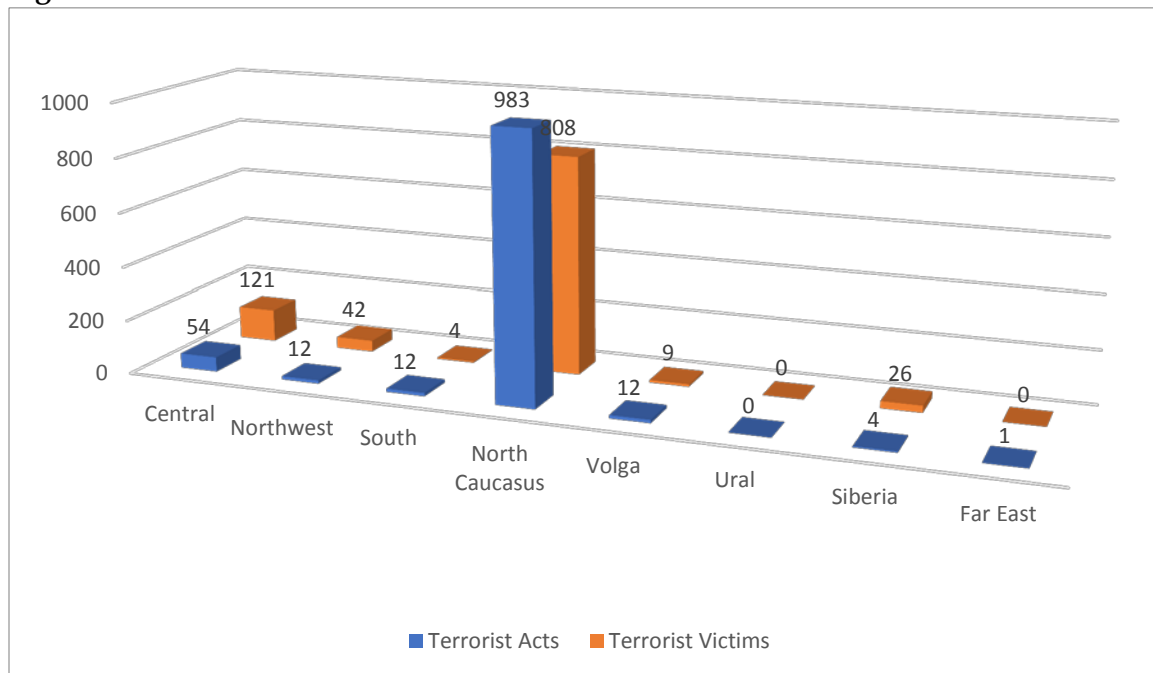
Until the rise of ISIL in the war zone of Syria and Iraq, terrorist threat in Russia had been largely perceived as a domestic issue associated with an Islamist insurgency under the umbrella of the Caucasus Emirate (CE). Formed in 2007 out of a network of *jamaats* with home bases in the republics of North Caucasus, the CE established links to global jihadist movements and replaced localized claims for national independence with broader Salafi causes. Still, by many accounts the CE has remained a local project that emerged out of and responded to local problems: rampant corruption, pervasive poverty, ineffective governance, and repression by local and federal security forces. This local orientation was further strengthened with the departure of potential terrorists to Iraq and Syria, which, some believe, was [facilitated](#) by the Russian secret service as early as 2011.

The defection of most of the mid-level commanders of the CE to ISIL and the creation of a local ISIL affiliate, Vilayat Kavkaz, in June 2015 signaled the transformation of a homegrown insurgency into a foreign-inspired project pursuing a global jihadist agenda. Russia's intervention against Sunni rebels in Syria seemed to accelerate this trend. When Moscow's airstrikes first hit ISIL positions in Syria in September 2015, the terrorist group [declared](#) jihad against Moscow. A month later, an explosion on the chartered passenger flight operated by a Russian airline from Sharm El Sheikh International Airport in Egypt took lives of all 224 passengers. The attack was claimed by both ISIL and its affiliate in Sinai, Ansar Bait al-Maqdis. In 2016, ISIL [renewed](#) its calls for jihad against Russia in its video propaganda and [claimed](#) responsibility for at least five attacks on security forces in Dagestan and one in Chechnya. The following year, ISIL-claimed attacks occurred in other parts of Russia. In addition to a series of assaults in North Caucasus, two firearm attacks on security forces in Astrakhan in April, the knife-stabbing August incident in Surgut, and a deadly explosion in St. Petersburg's subway in December. ISIL fighters also targeted Russian interests abroad: in December 2017 Russia's ambassador to Turkey, Andrei Karlov, was killed at an art exhibit in Ankara by a member of Turkish security forces who had defected to ISIL.

While many of these developments undeniably have a transnational character, beneath the brand of ISIL-inspired terrorism is a long-running trend of localized and fragmented violence in Russia's regions. Several features are immediately visible. First, as **Figure 1** demonstrates, terrorist attacks have not swept across the territory of the Russian Federation. The North Caucasus remains the epicenter of violence both in terms of the quantity and the magnitude of terrorist attacks. Second, according to the Global

Terrorism Database (GTD), maintained by the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism at the University of Maryland, a relatively small percentage of attacks are perpetrated by organized insurgents. Out of the total of 1,080 violent incidents registered by the GTD in Russia between 2008 and 2016, only 116 attacks (less than 11 percent) were linked to the North Caucasus insurgents or the CE militants-turned supporters of Vilayat Kavkaz. The attribution of multiple incidents to a particular group has been contested. The rest of the violent attacks were carried out by diffuse networks of militants, organized crime actors, and criminalized elites, which are so diverse and expansive that it is often difficult to clearly attribute responsibility.

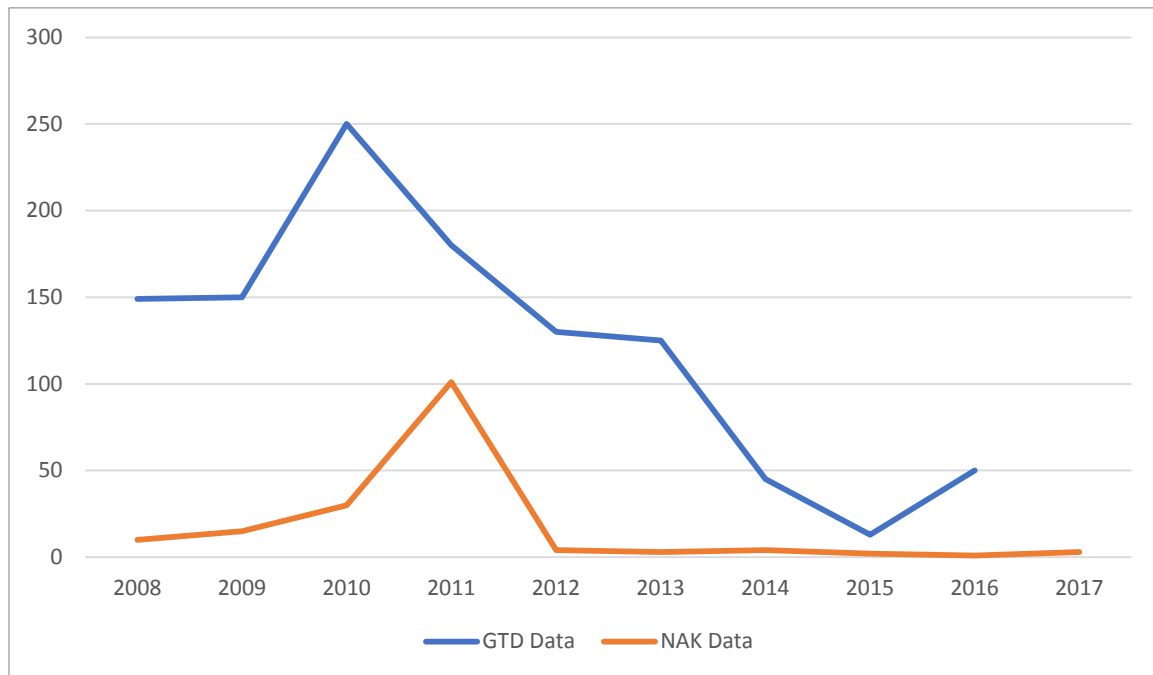
**Figure 1. Terrorist Violence in Russia’s Federal Districts: 2008-2016**



Source: [Global Terrorism Database](#).

Third, the decline in terrorist attacks in Russia is part of a long-term reduction in overall violence in the North Caucasus that has occurred precisely during the period of ISIL’s emergence. The GTD data shows a drop in the number of terrorist incidents in Russia from 250 in 2010 to under 50 in 2016 (see **Table 1**). These trends are confirmed by Russia’s official statistics as well. Data compiled from the reports by the National Anti-Terrorism Committee (NAK) shows that the number of terrorist attacks in the country declined from 101 in 2011 to 3 in 2017. Russia’s Federal Security Service Director, Nikolai Patrushev, leading the NAK, [announced](#) the reduction in the overall terrorist activity in Russia, including preparation for terrorist attacks and organization of small terrorist cells from 779 registered crimes in 2010 to 24 in 2017.

**Table 1. Terrorist Incidents in Russia: 2008-2016**



Sources: [Global Terrorism Database](#) and [National Anti-Terrorism Committee](#).

Despite concerns of transnational influences promoting terrorist attacks in Russia, therefore, terrorist violence has remained homegrown, fragmented, and localized. This is especially true in Dagestan, where experts identified several features of its political, economic, and societal makeup shaping the nature of local terrorist violence: a diversity of ethnic and sub-ethnic groups; complex ideological and strategic perspectives characterizing religious actors; a politically divided and infrastructurally weak state apparatus; and the presence of a diffuse, fragmented illicit economy. Among the multiplicity of religious groups in Dagestan, for instance, some have taken on religious rhetoric “as a shell” used to justify criminal activity (such as extortion, racketeering, and violence) while outwardly maintaining a façade of religious adherence. Within Dagestan’s divided political leadership, as well as in its organized crime circles, many used extremist groups to carry out attacks on competitors. The sheer diversity and fluidity of violent actors in Dagestan, with some deeply immersed in the political, business, and security institutions of the republic, undermine the ability of any transnational entity to provide ideological leadership and guidance for a concerted domestic terrorist campaign.

### **The Stasis of Russia’s Counterterrorism Strategy**

The Russian government has traditionally relied on short-term tactics of suppression, force, and military-bureaucratic solutions as the preferred approaches to fighting terrorism and projecting its influence in its provinces. During the Medvedev/Putin duumvirate (2008-2012), the Kremlin introduced several “softer”

methods of countering violent radicalization, which included dialogue with various religious and ethnic groups, rehabilitation programs for former militants, and collaboration with human rights defenders. These measures were largely curtailed by 2013 when the Russian government defined security at the Olympic Games as its critical priority.

The [return](#) to “state terror” gained momentum in 2014 when the Russian secret service and locally manned security units carried out a swift leadership decapitation campaign and numerous clean-up (*zhachistki*) operations. These counterterrorism sweeps targeted both militant leaders and the rank-and-file, and frustrated the logistics, movements, and communication of the remaining insurgents. The door-to-door searches of villages and neighborhoods have also led to the arrests of hundreds of non-violent religious activists as well as the relatives of alleged jihadists who were detained in the wide net of security sweeps. Concurrently, the Russian government widened the scope of terrorist crime and imposed harsher penalties for a range of terrorist and extremist activities.

Counterterrorism efforts were intensified in the run-up to the World Cup with the Russian secret service expanding its map of counterterrorism operations. Security raids allegedly targeting ISIL cells were carried out in several dozen locations across Russia, including St. Petersburg, Rostov, Krasnoyarsk, and Yaroslavl. Regional authorities in the North Caucasus republics continued clamping down on various religious institutions, closing down mosques, religious charities, and religious educational programs. These indiscriminate tactics have marginalized significant portions of the population, who have been deeply affected by these cycles of violence.

The Kremlin has also returned to its elite reshuffling strategy and the appointment of outsiders to senior republican posts. The North Caucasus republics, particularly Dagestan and Ingushetia, have been among the poorest constituent units of the Russian Federation. The scarcity of resources overlaid with the competing local bases of authority has fed corruption and the embezzlement of public funds. The Kremlin sought to impose control over the restive North Caucasus by providing lavish financial aid and political backing for handpicked local strongmen capable of maintain authority (often through the use of a ruthless security apparatus) in the republics. This tactic enabled the Kremlin loyalists to build extensive business empires using embezzled federal aid, local budgets, and revenues from a range of criminal activities. And by coopting regional elites benefiting from the federal funds and program, the Kremlin may be perceived as an enabler of elite criminality and corruption.

In October 2017, President Vladimir Putin replaced the head of Dagestan, Ramazan Abdulatipov, with retired Deputy Interior Minister Vladimir Vasiliev, who became the

first outside leader in Dagestan.<sup>3</sup> Presumably, Vasiliev's task was to dismantle the stronghold of clans and subordinate the republic to control from Moscow. Overseeing a team of officials from the Office of Prosecutor General, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and the Federal Security Service, Vasiliev [dismissed](#) multiple high-ranking officials, including the Mayor of Makhachkala (Dagestan's capital), the acting prime minister of Dagestan, two vice-prime ministers, the education minister, and Makhachkala's general architect. Smaller-scale purges took place in other regions of Russia as well. While the presence of a fragmented "armed underground" precludes much collaboration and coordination among the disparate militant, criminal, and political actors, any power shakeup or elite reshuffling threatens to disrupt the political order of competing business and political interests in the republic. In some areas of Dagestan, the removal of powerful local bosses produced a spike in violence, while in others federal security and intelligence agents became active participants of contraband, drug trafficking, racketeering, and extortion much like the organized criminals and militants they supplanted.

### Way Forward

Highly fragmented, diffused, and complex, terrorism in Russia remains largely homegrown and probably quite resilient to the influence of transnational terrorist groups. Terrorist acts are carried out by a loosely integrated web of violent actors, aptly described by experts as an "armed underground" that is comprised of diffuse and fractured networks linking together militants, members of organized crime, and corrupt state officials. These networks also tend to be permeated by different ethnic, religious, and local ties. The reasons for individual acts of violence may be complex and varied, but it is often competition over resources and authority—in addition to the alienation of some groups of the population—that continues to drive terrorist violence in Russia.

Yet, Moscow's counterterrorism efforts, which intensified during recent sporting events to score another "victory" over the threat of global jihad, has done little to address the underlying factors behind radicalization and violence in Russia's regions. These indiscriminate and harsh operations may serve to push Russian citizens toward jihadist groups. Further, by weakening the local elite through power shakeups and centralized control over resources, the Kremlin risks losing the public's support as a decline in the benefits of federal aid may lead people to turn again to alternative sources of social justice and governance, including private Islamic schools and informal Sharia courts.

To prevent this, Russia's federal government should seek allies that are not part of the region's closed system of government and that are open to dialogue with the center. Local institutions of self-government still exist in Russia's restive regions. Until recently,

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<sup>3</sup> See: Edward Holland, "[The Kremlin's New Man in Dagestan: Corruption Supplants Security as Moscow's Chief Concern](#)," PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 549, November 2018.

the mayor's office of Karachayevsk was independent of the regional authorities, and the Dagestani city of Buynaksk had powerful municipal assembly. In the rural areas, there are multiple local municipal chiefs elected by popular vote who command much respect in the population. There are also business leaders who have made their fortunes without the republican authorities' protection. These individuals may be the Kremlin's last resort to rebuild vanished popular support, but the federal government needs to look past the next election cycle.

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