

IJOIS Spring 2017, Volume III
Program in Arms Control & Domestic and International Security

Transformative Networks: The Case of North Caucasian and Central Asian Jihadist Networks

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Abstract

Using two case studies of North Caucasian and Central Asian jihadist networks, this paper explores how each transformed from local movements to transnational organizations. This qualitative paper, which ranges from the late 1980's to present day, has wider connotations, as it argues that personal connections formed through prior conflicts are instrumental in this transformation.

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Glossary

AfPak -- Afghanistan-Pakistan
AK -- Ajnad Kavkaz
AQ -- Al Qaeda
AQAP -- al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula
AQIM -- al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
CE -- Caucasus Emirate
HTS -- Hay'at Tahrir al Sham
IIB -- Islamic International Brigade
IJU -- Islamic Jihad Union
IKS -- Imarat Kavkaz v Sham (Caucasus Emirate in Syria)
IMU -- Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan
IS/ISIS -- Islamic State/Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
JaS -- Junud al Sham
JMA -- Jaysh al Muhajireen wal Ansar
KBK -- Kabarda, Balkaria, Karachay
KIB -- Katibat Imam al Bukhari
KM -- Kata'ib Muhajireen
KTJ -- Katibat al Tawhid wal Jihad
LMA -- Liwa al Muhajireen wal Ansar
MAK -- Maktab al Khidamat
SCW -- Syrian Civil War
TIP -- Turkistan Islamic Party
UBL -- Usama bin Laden

Introduction

On August 30, 2016, an explosive-laden Mitsubishi Delica van rammed into the gates of the Chinese embassy in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, killing one security guard and injuring several others in the suicide attack. While no group has yet to claim the suicide bombing, Kyrgyz intelligence has pinpointed those behind it. In a statement, Kyrgyzstan's State Committee for National Security (GKNB) said that Chinese Uighur and Uzbek militants connected to al Qaeda plotted and coordinated the attack from Syria. Investigative reporting from Kyrgyzstan has also identified the mastermind of the attack as an Uzbek al Qaeda commander who was born in Kyrgyzstan and then traveled to Syria to fight alongside the jihadist group.

The bombing in Kyrgyzstan is just one such instance that highlights the increasing danger of transnational jihadist networks, which use internationalized civil wars as a training hub and launching pad to export attacks around the world. This phenomenon is nothing new, as internal conflicts have often turned international, like the Spanish Civil War, the Lebanese Civil War, or perhaps more famously the civil wars in Afghanistan (Richardson 1976, Midlarsky 2014). In all of these cases, the fighting began with local grievances before being internationalized and the focus transformed. What is newer is the rising number of cases of foreign fighter involvement in Muslim causes. Hegghammer (2010-11) surveys the period 1945 to 2009 and finds that eighteen of the seventy armed conflicts in the Muslim world involved foreign fighters, but only two of those eighteen before 1980.

The dangers posed by internationalized civil wars are fairly straightforward, in that foreign fighters gain knowledge, expertise, and connections and may end up exporting the violence to their home countries or elsewhere. In the case of Afghanistan, a safe-haven for dangerous actors may prove catastrophic for countries thousands of miles away. Al Qaeda used its safe-havens in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan to plot the 9/11 attacks. It was also able to use this haven to funnel money, resources, and fighters to conflicts around the world.

In the case of the Chinese embassy bombing mentioned above, the Kyrgyzstan bomber and several suspects identified as helping the bomber logistically, came from Syria. Syria, which is currently in its sixth year of civil war, has become the forefront for the global jihad. Many different nationalities and ethnic groups have appeared on the battlefield with various different groups – including al Qaeda and the Islamic State. Tens of thousands of foreign fighters have poured into Syria's borders to fight in the civil war on both sides of the conflict. It is worth looking into how and why these different groups wind up on the frontlines of Syria's battles.

Much work has already been done on European jihadists, Arab foreign fighters and Iranian-backed Shia militias from Iraq, Lebanon, Afghanistan and Pakistan, but little has been done to look at Chechen, North Caucasian, or Russian-speaking foreign fighters, or Central Asian militants in Syria. Recently, Western analysts and researchers have been predominantly concerned with European, American, or Arab foreign fighters recruited to fight in Syria. But it is equally as important to look at other foreign fighters, who are just as dangerous. What put the Chechen/North Caucasian and Central Asian jihadists pipelines on the same par as Arab jihadist networks is that the former have also been in place for decades.

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Like the Afghan Arabs of the 1980's, North Caucasian and Central Asian militants have had longstanding networks. Chechens have appeared in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria, Yemen, and possibly elsewhere. The same is true for Central Asians (especially so for Afghanistan and Pakistan). Conversely, this is evident with Arab foreign fighters fighting with Chechen rebels and militants since the early 1990's. But it is important to look at how these networks began, key players, and why these networks survive. These answers will help explain why we have seen these fighters pop up in various jihadist conflicts around the world: how transnational networks have emerged in the last generation, when they were rare beforehand (Hegghammer, 2010).

In this thesis, I will be looking at how jihadist networks transform local movements into transnational organizations, in a comparative case study of Chechen/North Caucasian and Central Asian fighters.

Literature Review

Based on the available research, much work has been done to examine jihadist networks in general. For instance, in 2010 Thomas Hegghammer looked into why certain conflicts see an influx of foreign fighters. One hypothesis is that the local movements include some small degree of an Islamist ideology which can link to jihadist interpretations. Hegghammer finds that foreign jihadists (or groups), looking to fight in what they believe to be a global religious conflict in which all true Muslims should be obligated to participate, flood the local movements with fighters (Hegghammer, 2010).

This is similar to what Monica Toft found in 2007, in that civil conflicts with even a limited or merely cultural Islamic identity are more likely to escalate and transform into a full-scale religious civil war (Toft, 2007, 2015). The potential for international outreach in Islamic communities is particularly strong because Islam allows for a global perception of a single community, or *Ummah*, that is at risk. This perception is strongly held in jihadist circles, which helps explain why they tend to join an insurgency with even the most minimally observant Islamic identity. Toft also found that religious civil wars are often bloodier, longer in duration, and have been increasing in the percentage of overall civil wars around the world (2007, 98). In citing an empirical study in her own prior work, she writes, "A recent empirical survey of civil wars from 1940 to 2000 revealed two findings. First, the percentage of civil wars in which religion has become a central issue has increased over time. Second, these civil wars are much more destructive than wars fought over other issues, they result in more casualties and more noncombatant deaths, and they last longer."

The transnational Islamic identity helps us explain how global jihadist groups like al Qaeda have exploited these conflicts to create transnational networks rooted in the infiltrated local movements and groups. The idea of a global *Ummah* is exactly how and why al Qaeda (hereafter referred to as AQ) was founded in the first place. As Bruce Hoffman, an expert on AQ, states, "Al Qaeda serves as the base or foundation from which worldwide Islamic revolution can be waged." (Hoffman, 2007) In fact, looking at how AQ is structured, one can get a decent idea

of how this actually works. Thomas Joscelyn, a senior fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, testified before Congress in 2013 on this very subject. In this testimony, he looked at not only how AQ is structured and its relationships with various affiliated groups around the world, but also how AQ manifested (and continues to manifest) itself as a global jihadist network: “As part of this Islamic army, Osama bin Laden ‘enlisted groups from Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, Oman, Algeria, Libya, Tunisia, Morocco, Somalia, and Eritrea.’ The burgeoning al Qaeda network ‘also established cooperative but less formal relationships with other extremist groups from these same countries; from the African states of Chad, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, and Uganda; and from the Southeast Asian states of Burma, Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia.’ Al Qaeda also supported efforts in the Balkans, Central Asia, Chechnya, and the Philippines. Bin Laden and al Qaeda pursued a ‘pattern of expansion through building alliances’ and had laid the groundwork for a true global terrorist network.”

Joscelyn quoted findings from the 9/11 Commission Report, which contains a significant amount of information relevant to AQ’s transnational networks. For instance, the report found that bin Laden’s relationship with the Taliban in Afghanistan “provided al Qaeda a sanctuary in which to train and indoctrinate fighters and terrorists, import weapons, forge ties with other jihadi groups and leaders, and plot and staff terrorist schemes.” These other jihadi groups and leaders came from all over the world to coordinate and join forces with bin Laden and AQ. Overall, the report estimated that anywhere from 10,000 to 20,000 militants were trained in AQ’s camps in Afghanistan between 1996 and 2001. This is incredibly important in the formation of ties that will later become useful in the analysis of Chechen/North Caucasian and Central Asian networks in Afghanistan post-2001 and in today’s Syrian conflict, which will be discussed later.

However, there are distinct limitations to the existing literature. In the context of AQ, or the conflicts in which it is engaged, most research has been done on European networks (Levitt, Decottignies, Rosland, 2016). Additionally, there seems to be an oversaturation of research into Arab networks, being that AQ is dominated by Arabs and has long operated in Arab countries. In some respects, analysis of recruitment efforts for jihadist networks is also outdated due to new technologies like encrypted messaging applications. This is particularly true for a post-Islamic State (IS) world, which really revolutionized the use of social media for recruitment (Farwell 2014). Much work, like Peter Neumann’s book *Joining Al Qaeda: Jihadist Recruitment in Europe*, has been done on AQ’s recruitment in the past, which was largely done in person (however, this is changing with advances in technology and in the face of competition with IS.)

In addition, Thomas Hegghammer recently wrote that “the study of foreign fighters has largely been confined to the subfield of terrorism studies.” (Hegghammer 2010, 55.) For example, the Global Terrorism Database only captures individual acts rather than broader conflicts, although perpetrators may well be foreign fighters. The interesting networks that Magouirk, Atran and Sageman (2008) construct from this data to analysis of Southeast Asian terrorist incidents therefore do not speak to the impact on civil war. Toft (2015, 222, 223) also argues that the literature has been too narrowly focused on suicide terrorism, and too broadly on

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violence in general, and too little, in both theoretical and empirical terms, on the phenomenon of Islamist engagement in conflict. She sees the need for considerably more empirical work on what distinguishes Islamist claims and how the international context and organization matters. In this context, especially organizational ties to international networks, the absence of significant work on the Chechen/North Caucasian and Central Asian networks, are equally as important as the Arab or European network categories.

Referring to the literature on suicide terrorism, a portion is dedicated to individual motivations for blowing themselves up, which at times can be useful. For instance, Hoffman found in 2004 that these motivations can be explained, in part, by the jihadist ideology. AQ, and similarly IS, have longed preached about the importance of so-called “martyrdom operations.” In fact, Michael Horowitz (2015) found that “the existence of al Qaeda as a critical node in a network of violent nonstate actors around the world also facilitated the rise of suicide bombings.” This is important because this ideology (rooted in Salafi-jihadism, which will be discussed later) is not just contained in one geographical location, which is evident with the number of foreign suicide bombers in various jihadist conflicts in which AQ or IS play a major role.

Horowitz also finds that international networks play a large role in this later phenomenon. “At the international level, between groups rather than individuals, social networks similarly seem to help drive the spread of suicide bombing.” He later goes on to show “how the large number of connections that Hezbollah [an Iranian-backed Shia terrorist organization primarily based in Lebanon] and al Qaeda, respectively, had to other groups helped spread the diffusion of suicide bombing.” It needs to be stated that unlike the notion of the *Ummah*, the ideology surrounding these “martyrdom operations” is not something that ordinary Muslims believe. Groups like AQ or IS have religious officials which are great at twisting words from the Qu’ran to fit their violent interpretation and to encourage this type of violence.

Global Jihad

It is also important to understand what the term “global jihad” means for this thesis. The origins of the idea of a global jihad can be traced back to Sayyid Qutb, an important Islamic theorist in the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood in the early 1960’s. His book, *Milestones*, detailed how the world is divided between a state of freedom, or Islamic governance, and *jahiliyyah* (ignorance), or dictatorships or even democracies. According to Qutb, the only way to remove jahiliyyah and institute this “freedom” was for a revolutionary vanguard to bring about this change through preaching and “physical power and jihad.” (Qutb, 1964)

This idea greatly influenced three important Arab mujahideen in the Soviet-Afghan War of the 1980’s: Usama bin Laden (UBL), Abdullah Azzam, and Abu Musab al Suri. During the war, the former two laid the foundations for al Qaeda through their Maktab al Khidamat (MAK). MAK was the precursor to al Qaeda, in which foreign fighters, especially from Arab countries, were trained and funded. Towards the end of the war, UBL and Abdullah Azzam, emboldened

by the withdrawal of Soviet troops, began thinking about the future of the jihadist movement. The two postulated the idea of a “base” from which to train, fund, organize, and coordinate Islamic insurgencies across the world. (BBC, 2014) With this, al Qaeda (literally “the base” in Arabic) and the foundations for the idea of a global jihad was born.

In addition, Abu Musab al Suri, a former member of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, who joined up with UBL’s al Qaeda in the early 1990’s, was instrumental in helping to shape the idea of the global jihad. (Suri, 2004) In his book, *The Global Islamic Resistance Call*, Suri wrote “because Allah decreed to protect His religion and His book and keep [the] truth, [there is a] perpetual group within the Islamic Nation, fighting for the religion, un-harmed by those who let them down or by those [who] oppose them.” (Joscelyn, 2015) This sentiment is heavily influenced by Sayyid Qutb’s idea of a global vanguard force, which al Qaeda sees itself as.

The end goal of this global vanguard force is the establishment of a global caliphate and the end of *jahiliyyah*. Those groups and networks who abide by a global jihadist ideology therefore see themselves as at one with various jihadist conflicts around the world. As a result of this ideology, al Qaeda has provided a “base” for dozens of jihadist groups from Morocco, to the Balkans, and to Southeast Asia. This means that those within this ideology are fighting for Islamic governance within a specific region, but also fighting for global Islamic governance due to interconnectivity and the idea that all jihadist conflicts are part of one larger conflict.

This global vanguard force also preaches *salafīyya*, which refers to the “forefathers” of Islam or the first Muslims. Salafists emerged as a modernist movement in the face of European encroachment in the Middle East in the 1800’s. It attempts to return to the “golden age” of Islam, in which the traditions and of the forefathers are returned to modern society. Salafi-jihadists are attempting to establish Islamic states based on a strict interpretation of Islamic law based on the salafi doctrine.

Theory

Based on what has already been written about jihadist networks and how they operate, especially within the scope of al Qaeda and the Islamic State, I plan to expand on this by looking at how these constructs fit the cases of Chechen/North Caucasian and Central Asian militants. My analysis works from the following starting point : The political and religious landscapes in the North Caucasus and in some areas of Central Asia were transformed by al Qaeda, thereby facilitating the changes and requirements needed for a local movement to become a transnational organization. This is especially important for Chechen/North Caucasian and Central Asian militants as many groups in this region are transnational. In some cases, these groups are much larger than European networks and are more similar to Arab networks in scale. This radical transformation of local movements allowed for networks to be established, which is why many North Caucasians and Central Asians are seen in Syria and still seen in Afghanistan.

Before going further I need to provide definitions of key terms—of jihadism, foreign fighters, networks, and the components of a jihadist network. Jihadism, or a jihadist group or movement, can be defined for the purposes of this research as a group or individual who ascribes

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to the global jihad ideology. Jihad, which is not an inherently violent term, means “struggle” in Arabic and in the traditional Islamic sense it means to struggle with both oneself to be a better Muslim but also to protect Muslims in the event of any existential threat (which is referred to as the lesser jihad in religious texts). In the basic sense of the word, a jihadist is someone who engages in this act. In the case of jihadist groups, these are groups who see themselves as having the religious duty and authority to wage war based on this idea. But groups and movements discussed in this paper ascribe to a global jihadist ideology, which means that they see the jihad as a global struggle. Al Qaeda and the Islamic State, both major examples of global jihadists, want to see the establishment of a global caliphate.

Networks are understood in the organization literature as more flexible and more decentralized than the standard organizational structure. Jihadist networks can be described as interconnected groups or individuals who share command structures, resources, or are in constant communication. Additionally, financing, both state-sponsored or private, can also be conceptualized as being a necessary component of such a network.

Hegghammer defines a foreign fighter as an actor who has “(1) joined, and operates within the confines of, an insurgency, (2) lacks citizenship of the conflict state or kinship links to its warring factions, (3) lacks affiliation to an official military organization, and (4) is unpaid.” (Hegghammer, 57-58) There are some problems with this definition, however, as foreign fighters can certainly be paid. For instance, in Lawrence Wright’s book *The Looming Tower*, he discusses at length how Osama bin Laden had his foreign fighters in Afghanistan on his personal bankroll. Additionally, as seen in Syria, foreign fighters can be affiliated to an official military organization. This is apparent with thousands of Shia foreign fighters joining the fray on the side of the Assad regime and being paid and supported by the Iranian government. That said, the Hegghammer definition gives us a good working definition for the confines of this paper.

I have two hypotheses for how local groups or movements are transformed into transnational organizations.

Hypothesis 1

Personal ties or connections to a leader or key individual in the already established jihadist network are instrumental in the transformation of local militants into components of a larger network .

To use an example to illustrate how this works, one can look at a group called Junud al Makhdi, comprised of largely ethnic Bashkirs and Tatars, that operates in both Afghanistan and Syria. Many members of this group, including its emir (leader), fought in the Chechen Wars alongside Ibn Khattab, al Qaeda’s first official representative in the wars (Paraszczuk, 2016). This connection to an al Qaeda leader was instrumental in this local group moving fighters to Afghanistan from Chechnya, to assist al Qaeda in fighting the US invasion in that country. In line with this trend, the group also sent fighters to assist al Qaeda in Syria. The ties established with al Qaeda in the 1990’s is what caused this group to become a transnational organization.

Hypothesis 2

Ideological affinity or overlap is more instrumental in this transformation than personal ties.

To be precise, ideological affinity is present in any case; even personal ties or connections may not lead groups to become transnational or join a larger network without some ideological overlap. However, this hypothesis looks at whether this ideological affinity is more important. An example of this is the many foreign communist or left-wing brigades formed during the Spanish Civil War to help fight alongside the Second Spanish Republic. This is evident with the communist brigades set up by the Communist International (Comintern) in which people would join from around the world due to an ideological overlap or affinity rather than any personal ties. (Richardson, 1976)

To be sure, it is quite possible that a combination of both ideological affinity and personal ties are at play in this phenomenon.

Data and Methods

In order to pursue a qualitative approach to this topic, I will be using the method of a structured focused comparison to look at my two cases. This method is defined as “‘structured’ in that the researcher writes general questions that reflect the research objective and that these questions are asked of each case under study to guide and standardize data collection, thereby making systematic comparison and cumulation of the findings of the cases possible. The method is ‘focused’ in that it deals only with certain aspects of the historical cases examined.” (George & Bennet, 2005) This will be a qualitative comparative case study, but limited elements of quantitative data will be utilized.

This is the best method for pursuing this project, as systematic evidence is not available for a more quantitative approach. The number of overall jihadist groups, let alone the number of jihadist groups in the two main jihadist networks that will be discussed in this paper, is not suitable for a large N study. For context, however, I will be able to draw on David Malet’s data base from the Foreign Fighters Project (Malet, 2007), in which he creates a typology of foreign fighters in civil conflicts using the Correlates of War (COW) Intrastate War and PRIO-CSCW Data on Armed Conflict data sets, 1815-2005.

In addition, some normal modes of case selection, such as deviant or typical cases, are not appropriate nor is the use of random sampling, which is rarely appropriate in case study research (Seabright and Gerring 2008). A structured focused comparison of jihadist networks belonging to al Qaeda and the Islamic State is therefore the best method based on the impossibility of a largely quantitative paper. In addition, central focus is on examining these networks as they exist within the confines of the Syrian Civil War.

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Case Selection

The al Qaeda and Islamic state jihadist networks will be the focus of this paper as the two are arguably the largest and most important networks in the jihadist world. Almost every Sunni jihadist group in the world has some tie to either of these networks. It should be noted that in some instances, ties to al Qaeda are deliberately hidden or denied by some groups. This stands in stark contrast with the Islamic State, which has been quick to announce ties or pledges of allegiance to it. This concept of how the different networks and affiliations work will be discussed later. The main focus of this paper will be on the Chechen/North Caucasian and Central Asian networks within these larger frameworks. I am choosing these subgroups because of the relative lack of attention compared to European or Arab networks. The Chechen/North Caucasian and Central Asian role in Islamic militancy from Afghanistan to Syria is an often overlooked and understudied element that is equally as important and dangerous as the others. Moreover, it cannot be assumed ahead of time that the recruitment and affiliation of these groups is identical to the Arab and Western pipelines we already know more about.

Data will be gathered from news reporting, social media, other academic research, and propaganda released by the groups themselves. Some of this data will be in English, but I will be utilizing my knowledge and understanding of Arabic to use Arabic-language resources; these are incorporated and cited in the text in accessible form in the online reports I authored for the Foundation for Defense of Democracy's *Long War Journal*. My employment at The Long War Journal and my internship at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies has put me in a better position to accumulate relevant sources, such as jihadist websites or social media accounts, which I monitor on a daily basis. The data gathered takes the form of text statements, photos, or videos which indicate ties to important figures in a jihadist network, locations of fighting, or even biographical material. The latter resource is helpful in seeing how ties work, as often times groups will disclose this important information, for example, in the biographies of killed fighters or leaders. I have also interviewed experts and analysts in this topic for this thesis, some of whom use pseudonyms to protect their actual identity.

It should be noted that any piece of literature that delves into exactly how jihadist networks operate can only be accurate relative to the amount of publicly known information. The nature of these organizations is clandestine and accurate information may be hard to come by unless one is an actual member of a jihadist organization or information is gained from current or former members of said organization. Sometimes an organization will issue a brief overview of its history, which includes slivers of network ties vis a vis who its leader is, where he fought before, why the group is fighting in that certain location, etc. This information is usually limited, but valuable information can be gained from these types of publications which will be discussed later in this paper. One can make educated guesses based on available information and knowing how these networks operate, but we can only fully confirm what these groups are willing to openly share with the world.

Nomenclature

In this paper, most names of groups and individuals will be transliterated based on their Arabic or Russian names. In other cases, the names will be translated for the reader's understanding. For example, Imarat Kavkaz will be referred to as the Caucasus Emirate. In addition, some spellings of groups or individuals, like al Qaeda, has been standardized throughout the text for uniformity. The Arabic term "Jamaat," or group, will also be used throughout the text. The term is popular among North Caucasian jihadists for naming specific groups within a larger entity. This practice has continued into Syria, whereby small groups are often referred to by its leader (i.e Tarkhan's Jamaat, where Tarkhan is the leader.) Many names used in this thesis are kunyas, which is based off of traditional Arab naming systems in which the parents take the name of their first born child (i.e Abu Omar, or Father of Omar). This naming system is critical in jihadist networks as individuals seek to hide their true identity, akin to a war name.

Jihadist Networks

Before getting into the actual case studies, it is important to define what a "jihadist network" is. At its core, a network can be defined as "a group or system of interconnected people or things." On this basis, a jihadist network can be defined as interconnected groups, cells, or individuals within the same group structure. A jihadist network can be a small, interconnected cell or a large group with vast territorial areas of operations. To illustrate this, those individuals in the infamous Hamburg Cell, which would perpetrate the 9/11 attacks, were a network. At the same time, these individuals were connected to officials higher up in the al Qaeda hierarchy, which would then expand the network.

A variant of this is various groups who pledge allegiance to al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in North Africa and the Sahel. Groups in Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger pledge allegiance to AQIM's senior leadership in Algeria. These groups have smaller cells or groups which coordinate with other groups under AQIM's sphere. While each of these groups are separate entities, they all constitute AQIM's network. At the same time, they also constitute a component of al Qaeda's wider network.

Thomas Joscelyn best defined the al Qaeda network in a Congressional testimony in 2013. Joscelyn states that "the backbone of today's al Qaeda consists of its "general command" in Afghanistan and Pakistan (others refer to this as the "AQ Core") and its formal affiliates." (2013) These affiliates (or branches, as "affiliates" carries a connotation of a lesser degree of control and coordination) include the aforementioned AQIM, al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, al Shabaab in Somalia, Hay'at Tahrir al Sham in Syria, and al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent. In addition to these groups, Joscelyn states that allied or associated groups are also part of the network. "In addition to the established affiliates, there are numerous associated jihadist organizations that the Al Qaeda Network either influences or outright directs without officially recognizing the group as an affiliate," he states. Examples of this would include Ansar al Sharia in Libya, Ansar Dine in Mali, Ansaru in Nigeria, or Fatah al Islam in Lebanon.

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Marc Sageman in his book *Understanding Terror Networks*, he states that a network “can be viewed as a collection of nodes connected through links. Some nodes are more popular and are attached to more links, connecting them to other more isolated nodes. These more connected nodes, called hubs, are important components of a terrorist network.” (Sageman, 2004) Essentially, AQIM would be a hub in the aforementioned example, and its affiliated groups would be nodes. These nodes would be connected to al Qaeda’s general command hub via the connected hub of AQIM. Sageman also notes that these connected links and hubs can transcend geographical boundaries.

The North Caucasus Case

The phenomenon of local organizations being transformed into transnational entities can be exemplified in two case studies. The first is the case of North Caucasian fighters, especially from the Russian Republics of Chechnya and Dagestan. During the two wars in Chechnya, the local insurgents, who began as nationalists, were significantly transformed into transnational jihadists through contact with external networks. The second case is that of Central Asian Islamist movements, many of which began as movements focused on local issues in their respective countries. However, after being forced to relocate to Afghanistan in the 1990’s, they began a transformation into transnational entities, sending fighters elsewhere. To begin, I think it is important to start with the case of North Caucasian fighters.

It is first important to define “North Caucasians.” There are more than four dozen ethno-linguistic groups in the Caucasus mountain region of southern Russia. In using the term North Caucasian, I am referring to those fighters who are originally from the Russian republics of Chechnya, Dagestan, Ingushetia, North Ossetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachay-Cherkessia, and Stavropol Kray. Fighters from other parts of the Russian Federation who merged into North Caucasus groups are included, such as Tatarstan and Bashkortostan. In addition, I am also including fighters from the south Caucasus (Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan) who aligned with North Caucasus groups. At least one group profiled includes leadership from the Crimean Peninsula in Ukraine, which is also added due to ethnic ties to the North Caucasus.

The North Caucasus has had a long history of conflict, especially the Chechen people, with the many incarnations of Russian governance under tsarist and Soviet rule as well as after Russian independence. The historical conflict was largely nationalistic in nature, as the Chechens have long wanted an independent home outside of Russian control. However, starting in the First Chechen War in the 1990’s, goals began to change. This appears to be largely due to the presence of al Qaeda within the insurgency. As the global jihadist group began sending fighters to the region and having its members staffed in important positions in various local groups, the insurgency began shifting from nationalist to jihadist goals. (Hughes, 2008)

After the insurgency took on an explicit jihadist nature, the transformation of the local entity into a transnational one appears to be the result of shared ideology with a larger, already

established transnational entity, al Qaeda. This can be seen in the case of the Caucasus Emirate. In addition, many different splinters have formed as a result of this transformation.

Background

Originating from the Caucasian Front (also known as the Caucasus Mujahideen), a collection of North Caucasian and foreign fighters of the separatist Chechen Republic of Ichkeria in the Second Chechen War starting in 1999, the Caucasus Emirate was formed in 2007. The power grab by Dokka Umarov, the fifth president of the unrecognized Republic, officially abolished the Chechen Republic, and formed a jihadist entity, announcing an Islamic emirate within the claimed borders of the Republic. The move was condemned by various members of Umarov's own cabinet, but the now-emir (leader) of the Caucasus Emirate explained this move using the same rhetorical argument used by al Qaeda for the creation of Islamic states.

In a speech shortly after the declaration of the Emirate, Umarov said "The Caucasus is occupied by infidels and apostates and is dar al-harb, a land of war, and our immediate task is to turn it into dar as-salam [land of peace], to institute Sharia on its territory and to drive out the infidels." He goes on to say, "After driving out the infidels, we shall have to get back all of the historical territory of Muslims, and that territory is [also] located beyond the borders of the Caucasus." (Souleimanov, 2011) Additionally, Umarov explicitly linked the Caucasus Emirate to the global jihad led by al Qaeda. "Today our brothers are at war in Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia and Palestine. Anyone who attacks Muslims, wherever they may be, is also our enemy," he said. Umarov added "Our enemy is not only Russia, but also America, England, Israel and anyone who is waging war against Islam and Muslims."

Compare this rhetoric with various al Qaeda ideologues and officials who spout similar mantras. For example, in February 2016, Ibrahim al Qosi, a former Guantanamo inmate and senior leader of al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), discussed at length the necessity for Muslims to protect other Muslims, as well as combat those who "oppose the Ummah." (Joscelyn, 2016) In a letter to Abu Musab al Zarqawi, the leader of al Qaeda in Iraq, in 2006, then deputy emir of al Qaeda, Ayman al Zawahiri also wrote about this subject. According to Lawfare, Zawahiri discussed that the enemies of Islam "are both the external enemy—"idolatrous infidels"—and the enemies within Islam. The latter, he says, are "traitorous apostates" who belong to "the community of renegade deviation" and embrace polytheism and secularist beliefs." (Bar, Minzili, 2006) The latter is a reference to those majority Muslim countries who cooperate with American and Western governments against jihadist groups, like Saudi Arabia, and other Muslim sects.

The fact that Dokka Umarov would echo the same ideological arguments as al Qaeda should not be surprising. During the First Chechen War in the 1990's, Umarov fought under the ruthless Chechen rebel commander Ruslan Gelayev. Gelayev was an ally of and often fought alongside the Arab commander Ibn al Khattab, al Qaeda's first representative in Chechnya. However, the presence of al Qaeda within the Chechen insurgency significantly spread which helped in the radicalization and reforming of the insurgency into one with a distinctly jihadist face. Indeed, in 1996 Ayman Zawahiri traveled to Chechnya to inspect the insurgency, as well as

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scope out a potential location for a base for his Egyptian Islamic Jihad group. (Orton, 2015) By the time of the Second Chechen War, the insurgents were predominantly split between nationalists and jihadists, with the latter proving to be the most formidable on the battlefield. This can be seen in various groups, all of which had al Qaeda commanders staffed within their ranks.

This includes the Islamic International Brigade (IIB), first led by the aforementioned Ibn Khattab and Chechen Shamil Basayev. This was the “official” al Qaeda group in Chechnya at the time, with most foreign fighters operating under this banner. However, al Qaeda members were also found within the Special Purpose Islamic Regiment, led by Gelayev. Lastly, al Qaeda helped form the Riyad-us Saliheen Brigade of Martyrs, a group commanded by Basayev dedicated to suicide bombing, a tactic not indigenous within the Chechen insurgency. (Darling, 2004) Basayev’s own al Qaeda connections went back to the early 90’s when he traveled to Afghanistan to train in their camps after fighting in Nagorno-Karabakh. (2004)

The original transnationalization of the Chechen networks, then, originated in the context of an internal war, as many Chechen fighters were sent to Afghanistan to train in al Qaeda’s camps, subsequently to return to the frontlines in Chechnya. According to counterterrorism analyst Dan Darling, “Several hundred additional Chechens were trained in Afghanistan during the republic's period of de facto independence from Russia.” He also states that “a number of elite Chechen fighters were also made members of bin Laden's personal guard.” An unspecified number of Chechen militants fought alongside the Taliban and al Qaeda against the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan. This relationship went both ways as bin Laden reportedly sent “several hundred members of al Qaeda's elite Brigade 055” to Chechnya. (2004) Even after the September 11th attacks and the subsequent invasion of Afghanistan, Basayev and Khattab sent fighters to Afghanistan to assist in the fight against American troops. (2004)

Role of the Caucasus Mujahideen

By the turn of the millennium, the networks of North Caucasus fighters were clearly established. Before the attacks of September 11, 2001, North Caucasian fighters were found in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Tajikistan and elsewhere. However, their presence and role expanded greatly after the terrorist attacks and subsequent US invasion of Afghanistan. Chechens, specifically, were touted as especially good fighters. US Special Forces members speaking to ABC about their battles with Chechens on the Afghan battlefield said that they were “a different breed” and that they “stood out for their ferocity and refusal to surrender.” (Meek, 2014) As the conflict expanded and militants moved in neighboring Pakistan, so did North Caucasian fighters.

After the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and jihadist forces loyal to al Qaeda began to fight against US troops, North Caucasians were also spotted in combat there, although the identity of the official representative of the Caucasus Mujahideen in Iraq was never known (if this position even existed).

Elsewhere around the world, Chechen fighters have been found on the battlefield with other al Qaeda branches. For example, in 2014 a Chechen fighter was killed in a large-scale Yemeni military raid on militants in AQAP. The fighter was identified as Abu Islam al Shishani (the Chechen) and as a commander for the al Qaeda branch. (The National, 2014) According to Yemeni and Saudi intelligence officials, Shishani was a veteran of the jihad in Chechnya with the Caucasus Emirate. His high rank within AQAP would also imply he had a similar role within the Emirate, before migrating to Yemen. His case also represents how close the Caucasus Emirate was to the al Qaeda network, as he represents sharing of fighters and resources.

In *The World's Most Dangerous Place: Inside the Outlaw State of Somalia* by British journalist James Fergusson, a Chechen fighter was even found on the battlefield in Mogadishu, Somalia. Fergusson writes, "the best al Shabaab marksman was said to be a Chechen, a veteran of the Iraq War, who had shot so many people with his trademark Dragunov rifle that the medics at the AMISOM [African Union Mission to Somalia] field hospital had learned to recognize his handiwork." (Fergusson, 2013) It should be noted that with this case, it is not known if this sniper had any prior experience in the North Caucasus. However, it is likely he did fight with al Qaeda in Iraq during his time there.

Since the time of Ibn Khattab and Shamil Basayev in the 1990s, sending fighters to Afghanistan to assist UBL and al Qaeda in the fight there, the transformation of the jihadist networks in the North Caucasus, specifically in Chechnya, appears to have been both a case of ideological and personal affinity. The local groups in the North Caucasus most certainly transformed due to the ideology being espoused by al Qaeda there, but at the time, personal connections with al Qaeda leaders, such as Zawahiri, Khattab, and UBL, appear to have also played a role. Even after the deaths of several of these leaders and commanders in both the global al Qaeda hierarchy and in the local North Caucasian groups, these personal connections have continued to be important to present day. I find that without the mixture of both ideological and personal affinities, this would likely not be the case.

The relationship between al Qaeda and the North Caucasus, especially with the Caucasus Emirate and its predecessors, cannot be understated. Gordon Hahn, an esteemed scholar on this relationship, has noted that a declassified Defense Intelligence Agency document shows "not just Khattab's deep involvement but also that of AQ and Osama bin Laden personally with the CE's predecessor organization...in the mid 1990's." (Hahn, 2011). He continues by saying that "several times in 1997 in Afghanistan bin Laden met with representatives of Chechen and Dagestani Wahhabites from Gudermes, Grozny, and Karamakhi." (2011) Hahn also notes the fundraising activities of AQ for North Caucasian jihadists. For instance, Saif al Islam al Masri, a top AQ member in the 1990s, was based in Chechnya and then later Ingushetia and Georgia. (2011) These ties certainly help explain the transformation of the local groups in the North Caucasus into transnational organizations.

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North Caucasians in Syria

The best and most detailed example of North Caucasian fighters operating outside of the North Caucasus is in the Syrian Civil War (SCW). The SCW has seen a significant migration of fighters from the Caucasus since the war began in 2011. The exact numbers are unknown, but the numbers are estimated to be in the low thousands. Russian security sources have speculated this number to be anywhere from 3,000 to 5,000 by the end of 2015 (War Monitor, 2017). In many respects, North Caucasian fighters, especially Chechens, have played a significant role in the fighting in Syria. Numerous fighters within these groups has experience with the jihad in the North Caucasus, however, only the leadership of these groups can be profiled. My research indicates that most North Caucasian leaders in Syria had prior experience alongside either the Caucasus Emirate or al Qaeda-linked individuals in the Caucasus.

North Caucasians, specifically Chechens, first began appearing in Syria in late 2011. However, in late to mid 2012, these individuals began playing a much larger role in the insurgency. The first major group to form was Kata'ib Muhajireen, or the Muhajireen Brigades (KM) sometime in mid-2012. KM was led by Abu Omar al Shishani, an ethnic Kist, a Chechen subethnos that primarily live in the Pankisi Gorge in Georgia. In October 2012, KM participated in a battle in which it, alongside the Al Nusra Front (the name of al Qaeda's branch in Syria at the time), captured a Syrian air-defense base in Aleppo province. (Roggio, 2012) In December 2012, KM and Nusra overran Syria's Base 111 also in Aleppo province (Roggio, 2012). Just two months later in February 2013, it helped overrun another military base in Aleppo province, the 80th Regiment base (Roggio, 2013).

A month later, KM then merged with several local Syrian groups to form Jaysh al Muhajireen wal Ansar (Army of the Emigrants and Helpers, JMA). (Roggio, 2013) Omar Shishani retained his leadership role, as did his deputy, Sayfullah Shishani. Both men had prior military experience before joining the jihad in Syria. However, the routes and reasons for both men were opposite of each other. Omar Shishani, whose real name was Tarkhan Batirashvili, was formerly a member of the Georgian Armed Forces. Batirashvili had participated in the 2008 Russo-Georgian War before being arrested in 2010 for smuggling weapons. (Cullison, 2013) It is in prison where he became radicalized, after probably being exposed to jihadist inmates within the Georgian prison system. Being unable to travel to Chechnya and reportedly having a brother already in Syria, he traveled to the country in 2012 to join the jihad there. It is unclear if he joined up with his brother once in Syria. As such, it appears ideological affinity had more of a role in his transformation than any personal connections.

However, for Sayfullah Shishani, it is the opposite story. Sayfullah, or Ruslan Machalikashvili, was an ethnic Chechen who had taken part in the Chechen Wars alongside the jihadist insurgents. (Paraszczyk, 2014) After that, he traveled to Afghanistan where he fought alongside al Qaeda and the Taliban against the US-led forces there (2014). Based on this information, it is likely that both ideological affinity, as well as personal ties established to al Qaeda figures in Chechnya and/or Afghanistan, played a role in his decision to go to Syria. In the

formation video for JMA, a spokesman states that it numbered close to 1,000 fighters, which included an unspecified number from the Caucasus Emirate. (Roggio, 2013) Along with Machalikashvili, these fighters were likely drawn to Syria for the same two reasons. However, personal connections played an integral role within North Caucasians in Syria once infighting broke out between a pro-al Qaeda faction led by Sayfullah Shishani and a pro-Islamic State faction led by Abu Omar Shishani.

In Spring 2013, Omar Shishani pledged allegiance to the Islamic State (then known as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, ISIS) on behalf of the entirety of JMA. By May 2013, Omar had been appointed by ISIS as its leader for northern Syria, as well as the leader of its North Caucasian fighters. (US State Department, 2014) Several hundred fighters under Omar defected from al Qaeda's sphere in Syria to ISIS; however, not all of them were content with this decision. Sayfullah, who until this point was still Omar's deputy, rejected this pledge of allegiance and returned back to al Qaeda's fold with several hundred of his own fighters. Those who decided to stay with either Omar or Sayfullah did so due to personal connections between the individuals. Since then several North Caucasian Islamic State groups have formed around Omar Shishani. This includes the Dagestani-Uzbek Sabri's Jamaat (YouTube, 2014) which also existed prior to the feud, Abu Hanif's Jamaat, another Dagestani group that existed prior to the feud. (Paraszczuk, 2014) The latter was formerly had ties to al Qaeda's operations in Syria, and Abu Hanif had presumably militant activities in Russia before moving to Syria. (Paraszczuk, 2015) Groups comprised of ethnic Azeris also exist on both sides of the jihadist divide in Syria.

Many Azeris (also called Azerbaijanis) were members of JMA under Omar Shishani. As such, many left with him to join the Islamic State. (North Caucasus Caucus, 2014) Others stayed within al Qaeda's orbit in Syria; however, it appears more Azeri jihadists are with the Islamic State inside Syria. Indeed, the Islamic State has advertised its Azeri fighters in the past. (YouTube, 2014) While it is unclear just how many are fighting for either IS or AQ in Syria, Azerbaijani officials have said that at least 900 of its citizens are fighting in either Iraq or Syria. (APA, 2017)

The feud between pro-al Qaeda and pro-Islamic State North Caucasians continued and in some degree has continued to present day. This feud has oftentimes been bloody, as seen in the vicious rebel infighting in 2013-2014, but it has also manifested itself in ideological battles. Pro-AQ and pro-IS North Caucasians ultimately have the same ideology, as AQ and IS do not really differ in that respect, however, the disagreement, like the wider infighting between AQ and IS, boils down to different methodology.

In al Qaeda's criticisms of the Islamic State, a common trope is that the foundation of the caliphate is illegitimate because IS did not achieve a consensus among the Muslim community before declaring itself a caliphate. AQ has also criticized IS for its brutality. Pro-AQ Chechen commanders, such as Muslim Shishani in Syria, have echoed this sentiment. (Paraszczuk, 2014) On the pro-IS side, supporters say that AQ is not tough enough against the "enemies of Islam." Pro-IS Chechen fighters have also accused pro-AQ Chechen fighters of putting nationalism "over Allah." (Paraszczuk, 2014)

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Sayfullah formed his own group with the fighters who left Omar Shishani with him and quickly pledged allegiance to the Al Nusra Front. He was eventually killed fighting for control of Aleppo's central prison in February 2014. Additionally, JMA continued to operate under a new leader, Salahuddin Shishani and his deputy, Abdul Karim al Krymsky. Salahuddin claimed to be the official representative of the Caucasus Emirate in Syria, as such, this made JMA the official branch of the Caucasus Emirate in Syria and continued to be the largest North Caucasian group in Syria outside of the Islamic State's North Caucasian contingent. Salahuddin, like Sayfullah Shishani, also had experience in fighting in the North Caucasus. According to From Chechnya to Syria, a website that tracks Russian-speaking militants in Syria, Salahuddin fought under Ruslan Gelayev in Abkhazia in the Republic of Georgia and in Chechnya. (Paraszczuk, 2015) Salahuddin continued to be the leader of JMA until June 2015 when he and Krymsky were removed from their leadership positions within the group. JMA replaced Salahuddin with a Tajik commander, reportedly a veteran of the Afghanistan jihad, while Salahuddin went on to form a new group with members of JMA who left with him. JMA has since joined al Qaeda in Syria, however, this will be discussed in greater detail later.

This new group formed in July 2015 and aptly began calling itself the Caucasus Emirate in Syria (IKS for its Chechen acronym). (Roggio, 2015) Salahuddin pledged allegiance to the then Caucasus Emirate leader, Abu Usman Gimrinski. In subsequent videos and pictures released by the group, members can be seen wearing Caucasus Emirate tee shirts and sporting the logo elsewhere. While this practice of sporting Caucasus Emirate branded clothing or stickers was not exclusive to those North Caucasians in IKS --indeed almost every group that contained North Caucasians had seen this phenomenon¹ -- those in IKS seemed to have made a point of it. This was likely due to the need to establish the connection between it and the mother branch in Chechnya and Dagestan, as it claimed to be the official branch in Syria.

Salahuddin and his new deputy leader, Khayrullah Shishani, another Chechen with assumed fighting experience in the North Caucasus, would eventually be removed from this post, as well, and went on to form another outfit. However, this new group, Jaysh Usrah, while Chechen-led, was thought to be small and its current status is unknown. IKS is believed to still be active; however, after the fall of Aleppo in December 2016, it has been relatively quiet on the social media front. But in February 2017, a branch of the parent Caucasus Emirate, Vilayat Kabarda, Balkaria, and Karachay (KBK), released a video from Syria (Weiss, 2017).

The video featured a handful of fighters from Vilayat KBK fighting in Syria's northwestern province of Idlib. The flag of IKS was flown, which is likely the group that these Vilayat KBK members fight under inside Syria. The video was produced by IslamDin, which is a Caucasus-based media outlet affiliated to Vilayat KBK. This is significant as it shows that the Caucasus Emirate in the North Caucasus is sending, and openly advertising, its members to partake in the jihad in Syria. Additionally, it definitively shows that IKS is being treated as the

¹ <http://imgur.com/gallery/MI85A>

official Syrian branch of the Caucasus Emirate. It should be noted here that with Russian counterterrorism operations in the North Caucasus virtually leaving the Caucasus Emirate decimated in the region, migration to another theater would be a logical step for the group to take in order to maintain group survival.

Yet another group is Ajnad Kavkaz, or the Soldiers of the Caucasus (AK), which is led by Abdul Hakim Shishani and his deputy Hamza Shishani. Both of these individuals had long careers in the jihad in the North Caucasus. Abdul Hakim fought under Rustam Basayev, a cousin of Shamil Basayev and close friend to Dokka Umarov. (Paraszczuk, 2014) Abdul Hakim has also been linked to a close associate of Ibn Khattab (Paraszczuk, 2015). At some point in his career, Abdul Hakim was promoted to the leader of the Caucasus Emirate's Central Sector in Chechnya. (Paraszczuk, 2016) Another cousin of Shamil Basayev, Abu Bakr Basayev, who was a well known figure in jihadist circles, held the position prior to his death. (Jawa Report, 2007) As for Hamza, he joined the jihad in Dagestan in 2004, according to From Chechnya to Syria. He and his group eventually found their way to Chechnya, where he took part in the fighting as part of the Caucasus Emirate's Eastern Sector. (Paraszczuk, 2016)

Ajnad Kavkaz began as a group within the larger Ansar Sham rebel group based in Syria's Latakia province. Ansar Sham, which has since joined al Qaeda's venture in Syria (Zelin, 2017), was predominantly Syrian. However, its military leader and a small contingent were Chechen. Abu Musa Shishani, the military leader, is also assumed to have had fighting experience with the Caucasus Emirate before migrating to Syria (Paraszczuk, 2014). Abdul Hakim and Hamza broke away from Ansar Sham in mid to late 2014 and formed the Khalifat Jamaat. (Paraszczuk, 2014) In early to mid 2015, it began calling itself Ajnad Kavkaz. This is also after a small group comprised of ethnic Circassians in Syria pledged allegiance to Abdul Hakim. (Tamimi, 2014) The jihadist group has since played an integral role in the fighting in Idlib and Latakia provinces. As other North Caucasian groups have disbanded or merged into other groups, AK has become the largest independent North Caucasian group in Syria. As such, it releases propaganda in both Russian and Arabic.

Before this, however, one of the more influential Chechen commanders in Syria was Muslim Shishani. Muslim, whose real name is Murad Margoshvili, is an ethnic Kist from the Pankisi Gorge in Georgia who led the group Junud al Sham (Soldiers of the Levant, JaS). He was a member of the Soviet military and was deployed to Moldova until the collapse of the Soviet Union. Afterwards, he joined the jihad in Chechnya and fought alongside Ibn Khattab, according to a video biography released by his group. (Roggio, 2014) From Chechnya to Syria also reports that Muslim was involved in at least one terrorist attack in Russia before his arrest in 2003. (Paraszczuk, 2014) After his release from prison, he formed a new fighting unit, according to the video biography, and pledged allegiance to Dokka Umarov.

He joined the jihad in Syria in 2012, quickly forming a group and taking part in battles. In 2014, he was one of the main leaders in the Al Anfal offensive in northwestern Syria. This offensive, which was largely led by al Qaeda-linked forces, saw a large portion of northern Latakia province overrun by rebel forces. (Wikipedia) Prior to that, JaS had taken part in several

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other battles with al Qaeda's forces in Syria. This led to the US State Department designating Muslim Shishani a global terrorist in September 2014. (Roggio, 2014) This did not stop Muslim, however, as he continued to fight alongside al Qaeda in Syria. This includes the Spring 2015 offensive in which AQ-linked forces captured the entirety of Idlib province. (Weiss, 2015)

Muslim's role within the al Qaeda network has also been celebrated by other AQ branches. In July 2015, al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula released an Arabic-language video dedicated to Chechen fighters². In this video, Muslim Shishani was clearly featured in several parts. It is unlikely that was a coincidence, as Muslim's popularity in Syria had already peaked. In addition to Muslim, his deputy, Abu Bakr Shishani, also had a long history of fighting in the North Caucasus.

From Chechnya to Syria reports that Abu Bakr has been fighting since at least 1999, when he took part in the al Qaeda-led invasion of Dagestan. (Paraszczuk, 2016) After that details are scarce, but it is reported that like Muslim, Abu Bakr also fought under Khattab. Another deputy of Muslim is Abu Turab al Shishani. While it is assumed that Abu Turab also has fighting experience in the North Caucasus, there is very little publicly available information to confirm this. (Steinberg, 2016) Like Ajnad Kavkaz, Junud al Sham also released propaganda in Russian and Arabic. It also released some propaganda in German, indicating recruitment of Chechen diaspora in Germany and Austria³.

Several other smaller North Caucasian and Russian-speaking groups exist or have existed in Syria. One group is the Crimean Jamaat, which included North Caucasians, Tatars from both Crimea and Tatarstan in Russia, and Tajiks. The group was led by an individual who went by the moniker Ramadan, who was formerly a member of JMA. The Crimean Jamaat pledged allegiance to al Qaeda in Syria in October 2015. (Weiss, 2015) There is also Tarkhan's Jamaat, a small Chechen group that began in Chechnya but migrated to Syria. It is led by the eponymous Tarkhan, but he is based in Chechnya not Syria. All of the fighters in the group are thought to have fought in the North Caucasus before in Syria. It has also released videos showing it fighting alongside other Chechen groups and al Qaeda's forces in northwestern Syria. A small group, Ansar al Sharia, is another Chechen group which operates in Latakia province. However, it has pledged allegiance to the Islamic State as its leader, Abu Bara al Shishani, was close to Abu Omar Shishani. Before this, Abu Bara led another Chechen group, Jamaat Ahadun Ahad.

Lastly, there is also the Nogai Jamaat. This group, which is likely only a few dozen ethnic Nogais from Dagestan, only began advertising itself in Syria late last year. A Nogai Jamaat has also existed within the Caucasus Emirate in the North Caucasus. The group fought with Ibn Khattab, al Qaeda's first official representative in the Caucasus, and Shamil Basayev in the conflict in Chechnya in the early 2000's before merging with others to form the Caucasus Emirate, according to The Jamestown Foundation. (Vatchagaev, 2007) The Nogai Jamaat was also linked by Russian authorities to the 2011 suicide attack at the Domodedovo airport in

² From an AQAP video released July 2015 saved to personal archive. Has since been taken down from YouTube

³ Videos released in 2014 on YouTube and saved to personal archive. Videos since taken down.

Moscow. (B92, 2011) It is unclear if this is the same group, however, it remains a distinct possibility. (Weiss, 2017)

In addition to these “independent” groups (independent in the sense that they operate outside of the official al Qaeda hierarchy in Syria even though they are still connected to the network), there are various North Caucasian subgroups within al Qaeda’s official branch in Syria. This includes Sayfullah Shishani’s Jamaat, the group founded by and first led by Sayfullah, JMA, and the aforementioned Crimean Jamaat. After Sayfullah Shishani’s death, an ethnic Uzbek, Abu Ubaydah al Madani took over the helms. After JMA, the Crimean Jamaat, and an Uzbek group, Katibat al Tawhid wal Jihad, pledged allegiance to the Al Nusra Front, the al Qaeda branch merged the Russian-speaking jihadists into one entity, Liwa al Muhajireen wal Ansar (Emigrants and Helpers Brigade, LMA), with Madani as its leader. Madani now serves as a religious leader for LMA and the larger al Qaeda entity, now known as Hay’at Tahrir al Sham (or the Assembly for the Liberation of Syria, HTS).

North Caucasians in Afghanistan

When the Caucasus Emirate was formed by Dokka Umarov, it had an official representative and branch in Afghanistan. However, this was not made public until 2014 -- after Umarov’s death.

In early 2014, a video entitled “Mujahideen of the Islamic Emirate of the Caucasus on the Territory of Khorasan [Afghanistan],” was released on jihadist forums and social media. The video featured a figure identified as Commander Abdullah, who was described as the Emirate’s representative and emir in the Afghanistan-Pakistan (AfPak) region. (North Caucasus Caucus, 2014) The commander reportedly invoked the ideology of the global jihad for why the Caucasus Emirate has a branch inside AfPak. While it is not known when those North Caucasians actually entered Afghanistan, the video confirmed what many analysts hypothesized: that the Caucasus Emirate did indeed have a branch inside AfPak.

It should be noted here that it is unknown if this branch is still in existence. In an interview with Mr. Orange, an independent analyst who has focused on North Caucasian fighters, he said that it “would be interesting if it still belongs to CE [Caucasus Emirate], seeing that the group is mostly extinct with a small group in Syria and a number of retirees and refugees keeping the idea alive online⁴.” Even if this branch is now defunct, it definitely appears that both ideological affinities and personal ties played a role in the formation of this branch. It appears it was ideological in that it was established to assist in the global jihad; at the same time, without the personal connections with Dokka Umarov and former al Qaeda leaders in Afghanistan, it may not have been formed there.

Chechens have also been reported fighting alongside both the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan. (Roggio, 2013) In addition to those two groups, Chechens have also been found with the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and its offshoot the Islamic

⁴ Interview, February 2017. Mr. Orange is a pseudonym to protect his identity.

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Jihad Union. (Meek, 2014) While many have doubted the presence of Chechen fighters on the Afghan battlefield, jihadist propaganda has sometimes shed light on this. Alongside the actual Caucasus Emirate videos, the Afghan Taliban released a video in 2010 in which Chechens can possibly be spotted throughout the video (Roggio, 2010). In a conversation with Thomas Gibbons-Neff, a reporter for The Washington Post and combat veteran in Afghanistan, he also spoke of he and his comrades encountering Chechens on the battlefield. “When we went into Marjah [a town in Helmand Province] s2 [military slang for intelligence officers] said that Chechens were advising the TB [Taliban] on AA [anti-air] equipment,” Gibbons-Neff said in a conversation on Twitter⁵.

Ethnic Bashkirs and Tatars from Russia have also been found on the battlefield in Afghanistan. The main group is Junud al Makhdi, which also operates in Syria. The group was formed between a merger between the Bulgar Jamaat, which long operated in Afghanistan, and another group inside Syria. Many members of this group, including its emir (leader), fought in the Chechen Wars alongside Ibn Khattab. It has only released a few pieces of propaganda, including its foundation video which was in Russian and Bashkir and then subsequently translated into Arabic. The Arabic-language transcript of the video is what this information is partly based from.

Azeris, like in Syria, have also been found in Afghanistan. In some cases, it appears that Azeris who had fought in Chechnya in the 1990’s, moved to Afghanistan after 2001. This is the case for Ebu Omer, one of the leaders of Azeri fighters in the country. (North Caucasus Caucas, 2014) Little information exists about Azeri fighters in Afghanistan, but in 2014 it was reported that at least 40 Azerbaijani citizens from one village left to fight in Syria and Afghanistan. (Eurasianet, 2014) In 2012, Pakistani authorities said they killed an Azeri al Qaeda operative in the tribal regions of Pakistan. (Roggio, 2012) Jihadist media in Afghanistan has sporadically highlighted the presence of Azeris as well. In 2011, the Pakistani Taliban said it executed a Turkish member for killing Dagestani and Azeri members of their group. (Roggio, 2011) The three were involved with a group called Taifatul Mansura (the Victorious Sect), a foreign subgroup of the predominantly Uzbek Islamic Jihad Union. Taifatul Mansura was established in 2009 to accommodate foreigners from Europe, specifically German and Turkish fighters according to The Long War Journal. (2011) Many Azeris are thought to be within this group.

As this shows, it appears that personal ties surrounding leadership plays an important role in the transformation of these groups. In addition, groups seem to coalesce under the same ethnic or linguistic composition. This is because keeping the same ethnicities or linguistic speakers in the same fighting unit helps with overall cohesiveness and cuts down on any potential infighting resulting from ethnic or linguistic divides. Personal ties seem to frame the composition of groups within these networks. This is especially true for Central Asian jihadists.

⁵ Conversation via direct messaging on Twitter, August 15, 2016

Central Asians

Central Asian jihadists have played an important role in both Afghanistan and Syria. From both theaters, these Central Asian jihadists have threatened the entirety of Central Asia. Suicide bombings, kidnappings, assassinations, and clashes have all occurred throughout Central Asia since the late 1990's. These attacks can be traced to jihadists who met and organized themselves in Taliban-held Afghanistan.

In discussing the role of Central Asian movements and networks, it is important to denote what the term "Central Asian" means in this context. In this study, I will be looking at groups and individuals from the Central Asian countries of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. In addition, I will also look at Uighurs, a Turkic ethnic group (as are the majority of nationalities in most of Central Asia) from China's northwestern Xinjiang Province. Fighters from each of these demographics have been found in jihadist groups in both Afghanistan and Syria.

That said, only the major groups, and the leadership, will be profiled in the research. This is because the major Central Asian jihadist groups have formed around only a select few ethnic groups, namely Uzbeks and Uighurs. As such, groups and individuals from these two ethnicities will receive the most attention.

Central Asians in Afghanistan

Central Asian jihadists began fighting in Afghanistan following the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan. Several groups have also been formed inside Afghanistan since the Taliban's rule dedicated to spreading to global jihad across Central Asia. This includes the Uzbek group Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), its splinter groups, and the Chinese Uighur Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP). While Kyrgyz, Turkmen, and Kazakh fighters have been seen with these groups, no major jihadist group has formed around these ethnic lines. The IMU, its splinter group Islamic Jihad Union (IJU), and the TIP represent the biggest jihadist threats to Central Asia. In addition, a Tajik jihadist outfit, Jamaat Ansarullah, also exists. All four are or were within the al Qaeda network.

The IMU was formed in 1998 by Tahir Yuldashev and Juma Namangani, two Uzbeks. Yuldashev was a radical preacher who had converted Namangani, a former Soviet paratrooper into radical Islam. (Rashid, 2002) During the Tajik Civil War from 1992-1997, Namangani fought alongside the Islamists and became a military leader. In the same period, Yuldashev was traveling the Middle East, establishing connections, before moving to Peshawar, Pakistan, where he established ties with Osama bin Laden. (2002) After the Tajik Civil War and with seed money from bin Laden and Islamist charities in Pakistan, the IMU was formed. According to journalist and Central Asian expert Ahmed Rashid, the IMU in the late 1990's and early 2000's contained primarily Uzbeks from Uzbekistan, as well as Tajiks, Kyrgyz, Uighurs, and Kazakhs. (2002)

The group quickly became a strong ally of al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan, engaging in battles against the Northern Alliance alongside the two. In addition, it began spreading across Central Asia, with bases in border regions in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. With

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material and financial support from bin Laden, the IMU launched a series of assaults in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan in early 2000. (2002) It also kidnapped four US citizens, which subsequently led to the United States declaring the IMU as a foreign terrorist organization. (US State Department, 2002)

After the US invasion of Afghanistan and the beginnings of counterterror operations in Central Asia, the IMU was forced to retreat to the tribal regions of Pakistan. There the IMU became more ingrained with al Qaeda and also recruited more local fighters. Yuldashev was placed on al Qaeda's top governing council, a position he held until his death in 2009 by a US drone strike. (Roggio, 2009) Yuldashev had also replaced Namangani as the overall leader of the IMU, as the latter was killed in battles with the Afghan Northern Alliance. IMU fighters participated in suicide attacks in both Afghanistan and Pakistan on behalf of al Qaeda and affiliated organizations, while more experienced fighters became bodyguards for senior al Qaeda leaders. (Roggio, 2011) This relationship with al Qaeda continued as the civil war in Syria escalated.

According to US intelligence officials contacted by *The Long War Journal*, IMU began recruiting Uzbeks to send to Syria to fight alongside al Qaeda's forces there. (2014) It should be noted that the IMU did switch allegiance to the Islamic State in 2015. (Joscelyn, Roggio, 2015) A splinter faction has emerged re-pledging allegiance to the Taliban and al Qaeda. (Roggio, Weiss, 2016) Much like what was found with the North Caucasians, both ideological affinity and the forging of personal connections appears to have been the reason for IMU's creation and transformation into a transnational entity that extends across Central and South Asia.

In 2002, a splinter faction of IMU emerged in Uzbekistan. This group, the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU), essentially became an ethnic Uzbek brigade of al Qaeda according to Bill Roggio, a Senior Fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies⁶. The IJU, much like its parent organization, also operates throughout Central Asia while now being based in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. In addition, it has also recruited from the Western world, attracting many German and American converts. (Roggio, Weiss, 2015) In fact, so many Germans (both ethnic Germans and Turkish Muslims resident in Germany) have joined the group that some analysts have referred to the IJU as the "German Taliban"⁷. This recruitment of Germans has also resulted in several terrorist plots inside Germany, including a major plot foiled in 2007. (DW, 2008)

Despite the inclusion of many Western fighters, specifically within the aforementioned Taifatul Mansura subgroup of the IJU, the group is still largely a Central Asian entity. In various propaganda videos released in 2016 and early 2017, the IJU detailed its foreign fighters (Weiss, 2017). This included many fighters from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. While the IJU has not publicly stated its role in Syria, it has also sent fighters there much like the IMU. It has, however,

⁶ Phone call with Bill Roggio, March 30, 2017

⁷ Phone call with Bill Roggio, March 30, 2017

hinted at this in a video released earlier this year in which IJU commanders addressed “the brothers in Syria⁸.”

Unlike the IMU, however, the IJU has shared little information about its leaders. This makes it difficult to determine what factors played a role in the IJU’s transformation. Based on the little information we have on the IJU’s founder and first leader, Najmiddin Jalolov, both ideology and personal ties appear to have been instrumental. That said, personal connections might have played a slightly larger role. What we do know of Jalolov, who was an ethnic Uzbek, is that he was close to Osama bin Laden. (Falkenburg, 2013) We also know that Jalolov was the mastermind of a failed 2007 bomb plot in Germany, as well as the mastermind of simultaneous terrorist attacks on Israeli and US targets in Tashkent, Uzbekistan in 2004. (Glasser, 2004) It is entirely plausible, therefore, that Jalolov’s personal relationship with bin Laden, and therefore the IJU’s role in the al Qaeda network, played a key role in this.

Another Uzbek group, Katibat Imam al Bukhari (also known as the Imam Bukhari Jamaat, KIB) also exists. KIB mainly operates in Afghanistan’s north alongside the Islamic Jihad Union, al Qaeda, and the Taliban. However, not much is known about the group’s activity or leadership in Afghanistan. According to Bill Roggio, intelligence officials he has spoken to have referred to KIB as yet another splinter of the IMU⁹. However, KIB plays a large role inside Syria and this will be discussed more in depth later.

In terms of Tajik fighters, one ethnic Tajik group in Afghanistan is known to exist. This group, Jamaat Ansarullah, is thought to be relatively small. Tajik authorities have placed its numbers around 100. (Bahrom, 2016) It was formed around 2010 in Afghanistan and participated in battles alongside the Taliban and al Qaeda. Afghan intelligence officials also report that it receives training from al Qaeda (2016). It has also conducted at least one suicide bombing in Tajikistan, as well as an ambush on Tajik troops near the Afghanistan border (2016). Tajik authorities, as well as Western security analysts, believe that Jamaat Ansarullah is a Tajik-splinter of the IMU (Interfax, 2014). However, it appears that has remained aligned with al Qaeda. This could be due to personal connections made by its leadership, but not much is known about its leadership’s history. Jamaat Ansarullah has also attempted to send fighters to Syria, as will be discussed later.

The last major Central Asian group in Afghanistan is the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), an ethnic Uighur jihadist group from Xinjiang, China. The TIP was formed in 1997 in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. It was formed by Hasan Mahsum as primarily a Uighur separatist movement with the goals of creating an Islamic state in Xinjiang. (Stratfor, 2008) However, its role in Afghanistan, and the connections formed in the conflict, transformed the group into a global jihadist movement. In jihadist propaganda, photos have been shared of Mahsum meeting with al Qaeda leaders Ayman al Zawahiri and bin Laden sometime before the September 11 attacks. (Weiss, 2017) TIP members took part in battles alongside al Qaeda and the Taliban

⁸ IJU video released in Jan 2017; video removed

⁹ Phone call with Bill Roggio, March 30, 2017

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against the Northern Alliance both before and after the US invasion of Afghanistan. After the invasion and the relocation to Pakistan, the TIP became even closer to al Qaeda. It continues to fight alongside al Qaeda's forces in both Afghanistan and Pakistan and has even conducted suicide bombings on behalf of AQ. According to *The Long War Journal*, at least two TIP leaders have also been dual-hatted al Qaeda leaders. The TIP's current leader, Abdul Haq al Turkistani, has sat on al Qaeda's main governing council since 2005. (Roggio, 2015) In addition, its former leader, Abdul Shakoor al Turkistani, was also the overall leader of al Qaeda in Pakistan until his death in 2012. (Roggio, 2012)

Since the relocation to Pakistan, the TIP has claimed several attacks in China. (Martina, Rajagopalan, 2014) Some researchers have doubted if the TIP actually exists in China and have stated that China has made up this threat to say it is fighting its own War on Terror. (Roberts, 2012) However, I disagree with this assessment. While China does exaggerate the capabilities of the TIP in China, it appears that the group does indeed exist in the country based on its own propaganda. While the propaganda also expands the group's capabilities, it does prove that they do indeed operate in Xinjiang. In several videos released since 2015, clips of members ramming their vehicles into crowded places have been released in official media. In addition, in some videos for claims of attacks in China, it has shown the alleged bombs being manufactured in Pakistan. While it could be possible that the bombs in the videos are not the same used in the actual attacks, in at least one instance the bomb matched the description of the bomb used in the attack. (Martina, Rajagopalan, 2014)

Regardless of if the TIP actually does exist inside China, we do know that it does operate in Central Asia, especially among the Uighur population in Kyrgyzstan. (Putz, 2016) This was, of course, the scene of the terrorist attack perpetrated by Uzbeks and the TIP mentioned in the beginning of this paper. While the TIP has been active in Afghanistan since its founding, it has since become a major player inside Syria. Much like the IJU, I find that both ideology and personal connections play a role; however, it appears that personal connections forged between Hasan Mahsum and al Qaeda in the early days of its history seem to have been the instrumental factor.

Central Asians in Syria

Like the North Caucasians, Central Asians have played an integral part in the civil war in Syria starting around 2012 and 2013. Most Central Asians at these early stages joined existing groups, such as JMA as these group were also Russian speaking, allowing easier communication. However, these individuals eventually coalesced into ethnic brigades of either al Qaeda or the Islamic State. Within the latter group, entire units based around one ethnic group have been advertised since late 2013. Tajik, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and Uighur units have all been profiled in the past. In addition, the successor of Abu Omar al Shishani as the leader of IS' military leader for northern Syria is an ethnic Tajik.

Gulmurod Khalimov made headlines last year when he was reported to be the successor to Shishani. This was in part due to Khalimov's former life as a police officer, with extensive US training, in his native Tajikistan. (Kramer, 2016) Tajik fighters, likely under Khalimov's leadership, have become one of the top providers of suicide bombers for IS. According to one study from December 2015 to November 2016, Tajik fighters were involved in at least 27 suicide attacks. (Pravda, 2017) This is quite a significant number as only 412 Tajik nationals, many of them with IS, were thought to be fighting in Syria in 2015. (Abdulloyeva, 2015)

Kyrgyz and Uighur Islamic State members are also present in the low hundreds. For Kyrgyz, this number is around 600. (RFE/RL, 2016) However, it is not known how many of the 600 are with IS or AQ groups. Kyrgyz officials have also stated that around 80 percent of Kyrgyz nationals in Syria are ethnic Uzbeks, the main ethnic minority in Kyrgyzstan. (Paraszczuk, 2015) As for Uighurs, Chinese authorities have estimated around 100 to 200 are fighting for the Islamic State. (Allen-Ebrahimian, 2016) IS has attempted to make the Uighurs appear to be a large ethnic group within its ranks; however, based on over two years of research and tracking I have done on Uighurs in Syria, the overwhelming majority are with the TIP in Syria. The numbers of Kazakh fighters with the Islamic State are unclear, but the jihadist group has profiled Kazakhs, especially Kazakh children, in several videos in the past. (Standish, 2015)

All of these groups have been found on the other side of the jihadist spectrum in Syria. The aforementioned JMA's second overall leader was a Tajik. Other Tajiks have been found in the Crimean Jamaat and LMA. Kyrgyz and Kazakhs have also been eulogized and profiled by JMA. Uzbeks and Uighurs appear to be present in much larger numbers in AQ groups in Syria. Several units have formed around these two ethnic groups. This includes two groups that originated in Afghanistan, Katibat Imam al Bukhari and the Turkistan Islamic Party. Two other Uzbek groups exist within al Qaeda's network in Syria -- both of which also have ties to Afghanistan.

Katibat al Tawhid wal Jihad (KTJ) is an ethnic Uzbek brigade in HTS. Before this, it was a brigade within prior incarnations of al Qaeda in Syria and an independent unit. It is led by Abu Saloh, an ethnic Uzbek Kyrgyz citizen. It has fought with various al Qaeda-linked jihadist groups in northwestern Syria. (Weiss, 2015) KTJ is thought to be one of the units that the IMU has recruited for in the past. Its numbers are unknown, but it is almost exclusively an Uzbek group based on my research. Katibat Imam al Bukhari, while also operating in Afghanistan, has a much larger presence on the battlefield in Syria.

KIB in Syria is led by a veteran of the jihad in Afghanistan, one Shaykh Salahadin al Uzbeki. Salahadin, who has loyalty to the Afghan Taliban, has claimed in the past that members of the Taliban, including Sirajuddin Haqqani, a dual-hatted Taliban and al Qaeda leader, sent him and his unit to Syria. (Paraszczuk, 2014) If true, this makes this transformation highly dependent on personal connections. Based on my research into the group, it is also likely that many other members of the unit previously fought in Afghanistan. Like KTJ, Katibat Imam al Bukhari is also thought to have been a beneficiary of IMU recruiting. The last Uzbek group to be profiled is Ansar Jihad, a relatively new jihadist group in Syria.

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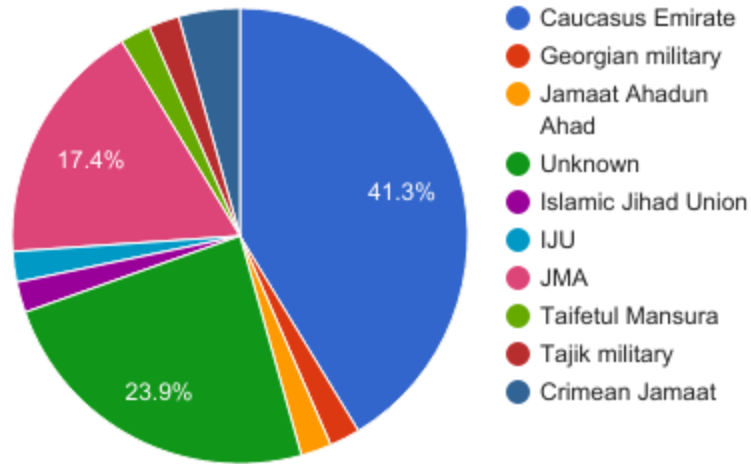
It is likely a subunit of al Qaeda's main branch in Syria, but it is largely an Uzbek group. It likely contains other Central Asian groups, but its propaganda is almost exclusively produced in the Uzbek language (and also some Turkish, indicating some Turkish presence in the unit). Its former military leader, Abu Omar al Turkistani, however was an ethnic Uighur. Abu Omar had formerly fought in Afghanistan in 2001 with bin Laden at Tora Bora before being captured in Pakistan. (Weiss, 2017) After he was released, he quickly rejoined with the IJU in Afghanistan. (2017) Abu Omar was killed in a US drone strike in northern Syria in early 2017. He was killed alongside a senior al Qaeda leader, indicating Abu Omar's status in Syria and within the network. (2017) While Abu Omar was a Uighur within Ansar Jihad, by far most Uighurs in Syria fight alongside the Turkistan Islamic Party.

Based on videos and interviews online of the group's commanders, the TIP claims to have been inside Syria since 2012. If so, this would make them one of the earliest groups based in Afghanistan to start sending fighters to Syria, if not the first. Since 2014, however, it has taken a much larger role in the insurgency. Based on my tracking of the group for over two years, it has conducted at least 12 suicide bombings in support of al Qaeda and other rebel groups. It has taken part in the capture of several strategic locations in the northwest and helped take over Idlib Province. (Weiss, 2015) I have also documented over 125 killed fighters it has eulogized in its media. Given its large area of operations in northwest Syria and the number of killed fighters, its numbers are likely in the low thousands. Local Syrians living in Jisr al Shughur, Idlib, believed to be the hub for the TIP in Syria, and Israeli officials have confirmed this estimate. (AhlulBayt, 2017) Based on its Afghanistan-based parent branch, the ties formed in the 1990's with al Qaeda leaders is definitely a major reason why the TIP plays such a large role inside Syria today.

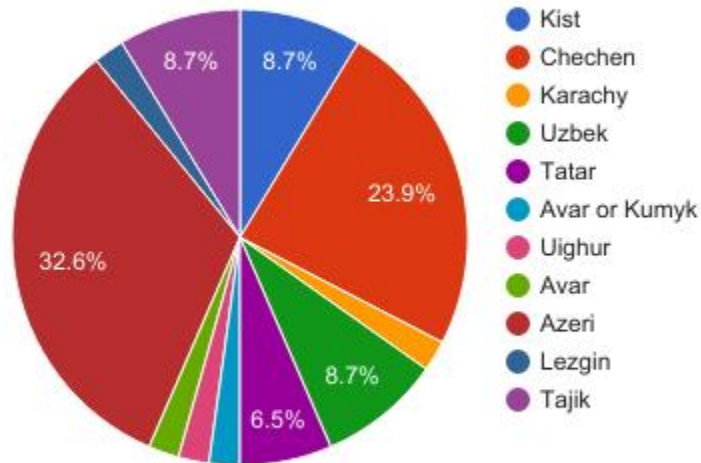
Prominent Jihadist Figures from Central and Asia and the North Caucasus: Summary Statistics

Based on the research done for this thesis, I created a database biographical material on 47 major North Caucasian and Central Asian leaders or prominent members of jihadist groups in Syria and Afghanistan. These leaders are prominent enough to allow for the compilation of biographical material. (Note: Due to the social media and media attention in and to Syria, leaders and commanders in Syria are perhaps overrepresented in the data). I have included kunyas, real names, country of origin, ethnicity, group affiliation, prior group affiliation, and current status. I have also denoted the personal relationships of these individuals to the best of my ability. Some information could not be found; this too is denoted within the charts. In the charts below, I use this database to capture some of the characteristics of the identifiable leaders.

Count of Prior Affiliation



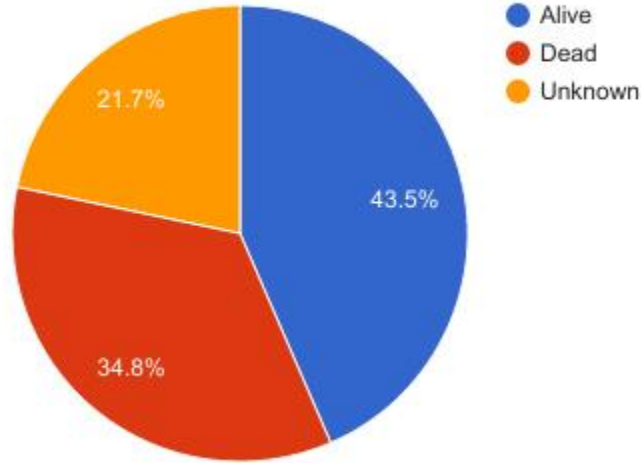
Count of Ethnicity



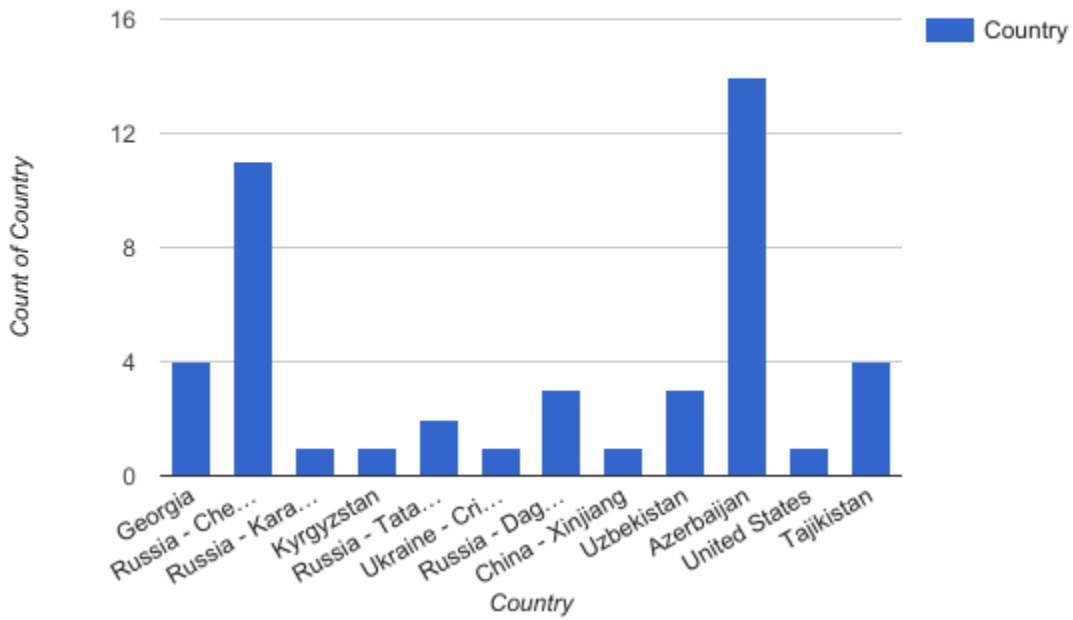
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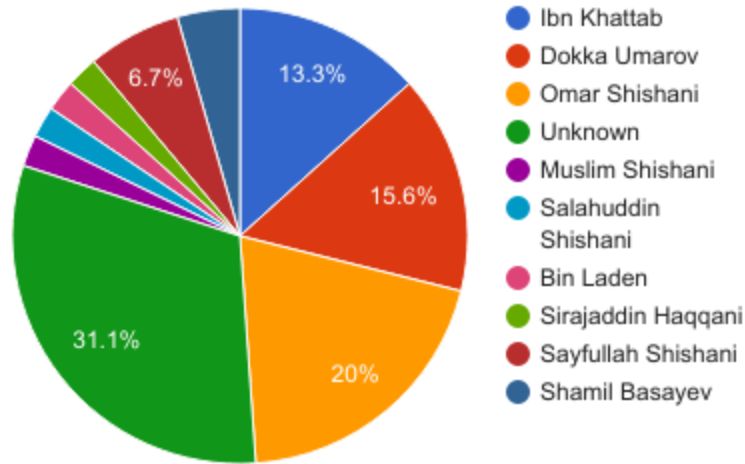
Count of Status



Count of Country



Count of Personal Ties



This data reinforces some of the earlier findings. Most importantly, almost 70% of these fighters have identifiable personal ties to key jihadist leaders. This adds weight to the hypothesis that personal ties are the most instrumental factor in the transformation of local groups into transnational entities. Some leaders or figures have lost social media contact or have otherwise lessened their presence. The statuses of others were unable to be found.

Conclusion

What I have found is that most North Caucasian commanders in Syria and Afghanistan had prior experience in the North Caucasus. The overwhelming majority were formerly affiliated with either the Caucasus Emirate or al Qaeda-linked fighters in the North Caucasus and fed into their networks. As for the few Central Asians profiled, they were mainly located in Syria and most had prior experience with groups in Afghanistan. This gives credence to my hypothesis that personal ties has a prominent role in the transformation of local movements into transnational organizations. However, I find that ideology must play a role in this or these individuals would not have joined these groups in the first place. In addition, groups would not have become transnational organizations without first believing in the ideology of global jihadism. Conversely, personal ties may have precipitated the conversion to the Islamicist cause.

It is thus impossible to find out definitively if either plays a larger role than the other without actually talking to these individuals and groups. Short of doing that, looking at the backgrounds and history that these groups have allowed the outside to see is still a good way of determining this information. While the ideology is important, it appears from this research that personal ties play a much more critical role. Many of the commanders and fighters profiled, in fact around 28%, had fought with Ibn Khattab or Dokka Umarov in the past. From the time that

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the Syrian conflict started, for example, this was over a decade later. If personal ties to individuals within al Qaeda were not important, they would not have continued to play an integral role that many years later. Looking at the IMU as an example, the ties that Tohir Yuldashev formed in the early 1990's with bin Laden continued to play a critical role in the organization way beyond Yuldashev's own death.

As Bill Roggio explained to me, "the importance of shared personal ties cannot be underestimated¹⁰." He elaborated that "the clandestine nature of these groups (for example, al Qaeda and Central Asian or Middle Eastern groups) dictates that close relationships must be maintained to ensure both trust and a chain of command. Senior leaders, commanders, and operatives have forged close ties on numerous jihadist battlefields over the past four decades (Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Syria, Somalia, Libya, Mali, Egypt, Algeria, etc.). These relationships have allowed the groups to fight side-by-side over extended periods of time, and has elevated the local groups to global status."

Personal ties also seem to make a difference in determining which side of the jihadist spectrum a group a group joins. For example, Abu Omar Shishani had no prior relationship to an individual within the al Qaeda network. On the flipside, Sayfullah Shishani did have extensive ties to individuals in the North Caucasus affiliated with al Qaeda. The former defected to the Islamic State, while the latter stayed loyal to the AQ network.

More research needs to be done into all facets of this study, especially on the ideology side. This is a much more complicated task if based only on open-source information and would require direct communication with these individuals or groups. Talking to terrorists, while sometimes beneficial, is not something I am keen on doing. That said, more information in this aspect would definitely help in understanding what definitively plays more of an instrumental role in the transformation of local jihadists movements into transnational organizations.

¹⁰ Phone call with Bill Roggio on March 30, 2017

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