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Between Caucasus and caliphate: the splintering of the North Caucasus insurgency

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ABSTRACT

In December 2014, several high-ranking field commanders from the Caucasus Emirate (Imarat Kavkaz, IK), an insurgent and designated terrorist group in Russia's North Caucasus, pledged allegiance to the Islamic State (IS). Following the subsequent defection of many of the IK's surviving commanders, IS consolidated its regional presence with the establishment of a formal branch, the Caucasus Wilayah (IS/CW). This paper uses Social Movement Theory's concept of framing to interpret North Caucasus insurgent leaders' response to the Syrian conflict and identify the differences in the competing factions' articulated ideologies. It finds that IS/CW leaders have sought to draw on the emotional appeal of the "caliphate" and redirect it back into the local insurgency, while neglecting to articulate alternative tactics or goals. Those leaders who remained loyal to the IK, by contrast, rooted their opposition in jihadi scholarship and rejected the legitimacy of the "caliphate". However, apparent ideological differences have been exacerbated by communication difficulties that have hindered leaders' ability to negotiate internal and external pressures. This paper contributes to understandings of the differences between the competing factions, illustrates how groups can seek to strengthen their appeal by avoiding explicitness, and demonstrates the importance of operational context in considering ideological change.

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Introduction

In December 2014, Rustam Asilderov (nom-de-guerre: Abu Mukhammad al-Kadari), head of the Caucasus Emirate (*Imarat Kavkaz*, IK) insurgent and designated terrorist group's Dagestan Wilayah, became the region's first senior rebel leader to pledge allegiance to the Islamic State (IS).¹ Accompanied by a prominent mid-level commander, Asilderov called on the region's rebel commanders to follow suit and support the "caliphate" (2014). Over the next few months, many did precisely that. In Dagestan – the republic that has in recent years accounted for the majority of the region's violence – the Southern Sector's emir defected (Usman, Sumaya, and Abdullayev 2014); with the leadership of Dagestan's Northern and Central Sectors vacant, Asilderov claiming their ante-mortem support, and lower ranking commanders also joining IS, that left only the Mountain Sector clearly

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loyal to the IK. In Chechnya, the insurgency's historic core, emir Aslan Byutukayev (Khamzat) defected in June 2015 (Byutukayev 2015a), several months after three subordinates (Saidov 2014). The emir of neighbouring Ingushetia joined him (Makhauri 2015b). In the last of the insurgency's core republics, Kabardino-Balkaria, Robert Zankishiyev proclaimed himself emir in favour of IS (Zankishiyev 2015), while IK-recognized emir Zalim Shebzukhov (Salim) remained loyal to the IK (Shebzukhov 2015a).

IS formalized its advance into the North Caucasus in July 2015, when spokesman Muhammad al-Adnani announced the creation of an official branch, the Caucasus Wilayah (IS/CW), to be headed by Asilderov.² The IK's already weaker position, meanwhile, was further undermined by security service operations that led to the deaths of many remaining IK emirs, including successive IK leaders Aliaskhab Kebekov (Ali Abu Mukhammad) and Magomed Suleymanov (Abu Usman Gimrinskiy); Asilderov's replacement as Dagestani emir, Said Kamilov (Said Arakhanskiy); and Syria returnee and Dagestani Mountain Sector emir Gadzhi Abdulayev (Abu Dudzhana Gimrinskiy). While IS/CW suffered many losses of its own, by early 2016 it was clearly the stronger party, with the IK leaderless and struggling to survive, at least within the North Caucasus itself.

This paper uses the concept of framing from Social Movement Theory (SMT) to interpret North Caucasus insurgent leaders' responses to the conflict in Syria and identify differences in the articulated ideologies of leaders on either side of the IK-IS/CW divide.³ The first part of the paper surveys existing literature of the insurgency's ideology, examines the importance of ideology to considerations of political violence and its relationship to framing, and outlines the paper's methodological approach. This is followed by an overview of North Caucasian involvement in the Syrian conflict and the IK leadership's initial conflicting response to it. The third section examines how IS/CW leaders have framed their decision to defect and argues that they have sought to draw on the emotional appeal of the "caliphate" and redirect it back into the domestic insurgency, but have devoted little time to articulating alternative tactics or goals or explaining how alignment with IS will transform the situation in the region. The fourth section highlights how IK leaders, by contrast, have rooted their opposition in jihadist⁴ scholarship and rejected the legitimacy of the "caliphate" presented by IS. The final part of the paper looks at the internal organizational role played by communiqués and how communication difficulties have hindered the leadership's ability to negotiate internal and external pressures and present a united image. This paper thus contributes to understandings of the differences between the competing factions, illustrates the way in which groups can seek to strengthen their appeal by avoiding being explicit and offering detailed rational argumentation, and demonstrates the importance of operational context in considering apparent ideological change.

The ideology of the North Caucasus insurgency and framing theory

Ideology can be defined as "a set of interconnected beliefs and their associated attitudes, shared and used by members of a group or population, that relate to problematic aspects of social and political topics. These beliefs have an explicit evaluative and implicit behavioral component" (Fine and Sandstrom 1993, 24). Much of the literature on the North Caucasus insurgency's ideology focuses on its origins in the First and Second Chechen wars (1994–

1996 and 1999–2002, respectively) and the increasing influence of its Islamist wing throughout the existence of the self-proclaimed Chechen Republic of Ichkeria (ChRI). However, the subsequent evolution of its ideology following the 2007 decision of ChRI president Dokka Umarov to abolish the organization and proclaim in its stead the IK has been the focus of much less attention. Recent scholarship has instead focused on broader issues of Islamic radicalization and facets of the conflict such as suicide attacks (Gammer 2008; Dannreuther and March 2010; Yemelianova 2010; Moore 2012), and treated ideology contextually rather than as the primary focus. This paper, meanwhile, is the first to address the splintering of the insurgency.

Within such work as has addressed the insurgency's ideology in more detail, a clear divide has emerged over the extent of the IK's engagement with jihadist ideas and movements beyond the region. Some authors have portrayed the IK as ideologically aligned with Al-Qaeda (AQ) and a member of the so-called global jihadist movement. Hahn (2014, Loc 6605), the most prominent proponent of this view, has – in highly polemical and politicized terms – argued that the IK is ideologically “in lockstep with AQ”. In a more balanced contribution, Sagramoso (2012, 593) has asserted that the IK is guided by “similar, if not identical” beliefs and shares AQ's “strategic objectives – the establishment of an Islamic state in the Caucasus, to be ruled by Islamic *Shari'ah* law”. By contrast, Campana and Ratelle (2014) have argued that recruitment and targeting are determined principally by “local imperatives”, with groups focused on survival and short-term goals rather than implementing a grand strategy. Separately, Campana and Ducol (2015) have shown local references to dominate IK websites, while Ratelle (2013, 5) has argued that the IK's leadership has “always remained focused on the Russian state and its local proxies” and displays indifference to the West.

Several problems have plagued this debate. Firstly, with some recent exceptions (Campana and Ducol 2015; Youngman, forthcoming), there has been an over-reliance on secondary sources, and approaches to material produced by the insurgency itself have often been selective rather than comprehensive, divorcing statements from their communicative context. Secondly, existing work has often imported simplistic understandings of jihadism without critical reflection on their applicability to the North Caucasus. The notion of a “global jihadist movement”, for example, is largely the creation of Western policy and analysis (van Linschoten and Kuehn 2012), and carries with it connotations of an ideological unity conspicuous by its absence in the diverse and factionalized landscape of jihadism – acknowledgement of which is crucial to any assessment of decisions to align with one or another strand or movement within it. Furthermore, existing typologies of jihadist ideologies are frequently drawn from the study of Arabic-speaking actors operating in Muslim majority countries, and as such can be a poor fit for the political realities of the North Caucasus. To cite but one example that has migrated to the literature on the region, the already contentious distinction between the near enemy (usually referring to the Muslim rulers of the Middle East) and the far enemy (the US and the West) is simply not operational in a region where there are three layers of actors, not two: local Muslim rulers, non-Muslim Russia and the non-Muslim West.⁵ Treating Russia as the near enemy requires that one overlook the importance of religion as a key distinguishing characteristic in the original dichotomy, whereas conceptualizing it as the far enemy prevents consideration of any transnational dimension to ideology.

Alternative typologies fare little better in their suitability for the North Caucasus (Youngman, forthcoming).

The importance of rhetoric and ideology

In existing literature on the North Caucasus insurgency, two further approaches to the topic of ideology are evident and pertinent to considerations of the split. One has been to draw conclusions based on the attacks groups have conducted. Purely quantitative assessments, however, are problematic for several reasons. Firstly, by relying on databases of media reporting, analyses are often assessing the variations and peculiarities of media reporting rather than insurgent behaviour itself.⁶ Secondly, insurgency and terrorism⁷ are about more than physical acts; instead, ideas matter as much as deeds, and representations are critical to any understanding of political violence (Ramsay and Holbrook 2015). Ideology is important for determining in- and out-groups and shaping collective identity, which in turn help shape behaviour by identifying opponents, rationalizing attacks and legitimizing actions (Drake 1998). Indeed, in some instances, ideology provides a compelling explanation for behaviour where other explanations are insufficient: Karagiannis and McCauley (2006), for example, observe that Hizb ut-Tahrir in Uzbekistan possessed the resources required for, operated in an environment conducive to, and employed a framing strategy supportive of violence, yet remained non-violent – something that can only be explained through the ideology it propagates. This is not to argue that all actions are ideological and that other motivations do not also play an important role, but that any explanation of political behaviour that neglects ideology entirely is incomplete and denies actors a framework to either rationalize their own actions or explain them to others. In most if not all circumstances, a person or group must be identified as an enemy before they can be targeted – and where such identification is public, groups' statements may help identify whom they threaten, as well as how they seek to rationalize their behaviours and forge common identities. Finally, while considerations of groups' activities is nevertheless important, a focus on them is incapable of explaining either ideology or any other dimension of the groups' existence in the *absence* of activity: throughout 2015, most of the violence in the North Caucasus was security service-driven, and IS/CW only claimed responsibility for two attacks (the very occurrence of one of which was disputed) (“V 2015 godu chislo” 2016).

The final approach to ideology warranting consideration has been to treat the ideological evolution of the insurgency in predominantly instrumental terms. Schaefer (2011), for example, argues that the Chechens have always employed Islamic fundamentalism “in an attempt to obtain support from other Islamic countries as well as unite the local population”. In this view, ideologies are deliberately vague and flexible, subject to change “as necessary to maintain support”. However, while ideology may serve an instrumental purpose, it cannot be understood purely as a means of mobilizing and socializing members, since even such instrumental uses presume ideology to be important to respondents (Sanín and Wood 2014). Nor do instrumental uses adequately explain why different actors in similar or identical circumstances make different choices. The IK and IS/CW share political opportunities and grievances, and the presumed benefits of switching to IS in terms of external support and momentum do not explain why some leaders remained loyal to the IK even after the organization's hierarchy was decimated. The shortcomings of

purely instrumental explanations act as a counter to any argument that groups switched allegiance solely as part of an internal power struggle among insurgent leaders: while this may have been the case in some instances – particularly in the case of the competing emirs in Kabardino-Balkaria – if the proclaimed ideology is taken as legitimizing a claim for power, this again presumes that ideology to be important to those in whose eyes that claim is supposedly legitimized. While it is important not to exaggerate the importance of ideology – beliefs do not necessarily precede, much less cause, behaviour, and it is important to distinguish between group ideology and individual beliefs and motivations (Gunning 2012) – any analysis that fails to take it into account and treat its content seriously is incomplete.

Understanding ideology through framing

SMT provides a set of analytical frameworks that help locate groups employing terrorism within a broader context and treat violence as only one part of movement activity (Gunning 2009). One of these, the concept of framing, seeks to address the challenge that “objects have no intrinsic meaning. Rather meaning is negotiated, contested, modified, articulated and rearticulated” (Benford 1997, 410). Framing theory can therefore generate insights into beliefs and, consequently, ideology, and provides a rigorous theoretical approach that helps avoid a problem highlighted in discussions of ideology, namely that it can be used “as a wild card to explain anything” (Sanín and Wood 2014, 214). Of particular relevance to considerations of political violence are Collective Action Frames, which seek to inspire and legitimize activity and which have three core aspects. Firstly, diagnostic framing provides the starting point for action by identifying not only what needs to be changed in a given situation, but also who is to blame for it (Della Porta and Diani 2006, 75). Secondly, prognostic framing involves articulating a solution to diagnosed problems and explaining that solution’s superiority to alternatives (Benford and Snow 2000, 616), often producing “intra-movement framing disputes” in the process (Wiktorowicz 2004, 17). Finally, since sympathy towards an actor’s goals is insufficient, motivational framing is necessary to transform spectators into participants (Wiktorowicz 2004, 16) and mobilize them behind the actor’s preferred solution. It should be noted that framing and ideology are not synonymous: The same frame can be used by competing ideologies (Oliver and Johnston 2000, 39), and actors’ articulated beliefs may differ from those actually held. Motivational framing is also distinct from actual motivations. Nevertheless, frames can both originate from and influence ideologies. Evaluating framing can, therefore, generate insights into ideology by capturing how beliefs, values, principles, and objectives are articulated.

Framing theory has been successfully applied to a range of Islamist actors (Page, Chalitita, and Harris 2011; Wagemakers 2012; Holbrook 2014) and the Russian state (Campana 2013), and this paper seeks to build on recent work on framing by the IK’s leadership (Youngman, forthcoming) to explore the differences in the articulated ideologies of leaders on either side of the IK–IS/CW divide. To do this, it draws on the communiqués of North Caucasus rebel leaders who have either publicly aligned with IS/CW or remained loyal to the IK. Specifically, it examines a total of 31 communiqués issued by 22 leaders across the region between mid-December 2014 and the end of January 2016, of which 14 were by IK leaders and 17 were by IS/CW leaders⁸ (Table 1).

Table 1. Communiqués by rebel leaders.

IK		IS/CW	
<i>Senior leadership</i>			
Aliaskhab Kebekov	4	Rustam Asilderov	4
Magomed Suleymanov (as IK emir)	1		
<i>Republic-level leadership</i>			
Dagestan (Said Kamilov)	2	Dagestan (no known emir/Asilderov)	0
Chechnya (unidentified)	1	Chechnya (Aslan Byutukayev)	3
Ingushetia (no known emir)	0	Ingushetia (Beslan Makhauri)	2
Kabardino-Balkaria (Zalim Shebzukhov)	3	Kabardino-Balkaria (Abdullakh Zankishiyev; communiqué missing)	0
<i>Sector-level leadership</i>			
Dagestan	3	Dagestan	8
Chechnya	0	Chechnya	1
Ingushetia	0	Ingushetia	0
Kabardino-Balkaria	0	Kabardino-Balkaria	0

The paper also examines statements by IK leaders Umarov (14) and Kebekov (12) issued between August 2012 – when North Caucasian involvement in the Syrian conflict was confirmed by the death of Rustam Gelayev, son of famous Chechen field commander Ruslan Gelayev – and Asilderov’s defection. Although this corpus of statements cannot be presumed to be comprehensive, particularly in light of the communications difficulties discussed below, it represents the bulk of leaders’ public communications. Additional statements were excluded if they could not be located (1); were in Chechen, Ingush, or Arabic and no Russian version was available (4); or audio quality was too poor (1). Lengthy lectures by Kebekov and Suleymanov on books were also excluded. The paper only addresses communiqués by actors within the Caucasus, and not those by groups in Turkey and Syria – while of obvious interest, inclusion would dilute the focus on how local leaders have responded to the Syrian conflict.

Communiqués were identified through monitoring IK and IS Russian-language websites and social media platforms, as well as additional searches. Videos were transcribed and coded to identify prognostic and motivational framing, according to a schema adapted from Holbrook (2014). In particular, the schema sought to identify: justifications for and advocacy of specific tactics and targets, imposed constraints and limitations on the same, areas and actors identified as allies and enemies, preferred strategies and end goals, appeals to and criticisms of specific audiences, expressions of positive or negative emotions, and references to operational and communication difficulties. Diagnostic framing was not included in the analysis, since the switch in allegiance did not necessitate a transformation⁹ in diagnostic framing and an initial reading of the communiqués did not either identify diagnostic framing as a key focus or suggest significant differences between the groups.

Before the storm: early North Caucasian and IK responses to Syria

The split in the North Caucasian insurgency can only be properly understood in the context of ethnic North Caucasian involvement in the Syrian conflict. Such involvement became irrefutable from autumn 2012 onwards, although it subsequently became clear

that many senior figures with previous links to the North Caucasus joined before this date. The majority joined the Katibat al-Muhajirin (The Migrant Brigade), which then merged with several other formations to become Jaysh al-Muhajirin wal-Ansar (The Army of Migrants and Helpers; JMA), under the leadership of Georgian-born Tarkhan Batirashvili (Umar al-Shishani). However, in late 2013, JMA fractured, first with a small faction breaking away and ultimately joining AQ's Syrian affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusrah, and then Batirashvili and a large number of fighters defecting to IS, the former AQ affiliate that had helped create Jabhat al-Nusrah in the first place (Batirashvili and Atabiyev 2013). JMA, meanwhile, continued to operate under Salakhuddin al-Shishani,¹⁰ until he was ousted in early 2015 and founded the Caucasus Emirate in Syria (IKS) with most of JMA's remaining Russian-speaking fighters. North Caucasians were also present in several other groups, most notably Jund al-Sham and Adzhnad al-Kavkaz, led, respectively, by Murad Margoshvili (Muslim al-Shishani) and Rustam Azhiyev (Abdul-Khakim al-Shishani). It was the continually shifting relationships between these groups – in particular, between IS and JMA/IKS – that created additional pressures beyond those coming from an increasingly radical conflict attracting participants from around the world.

Russian official estimates of how many of its citizens have participated in the Syrian conflict have varied considerably, but by the end of 2015 the security services placed the number at approximately 2900 (“Spetssluzhby Rossii” 2015; “FSB” 2015). Efforts to determine precise numbers are complicated by multiple factors: the inherently clandestine nature of activities, the use of different metrics and a lack of transparency in official measures, the political motivations behind statements, and the failure of the media and officials to discriminate between sources and groups. A further complication is that the category “North Caucasian” – who appear to account for the majority of such participants – is considerably more complex than often presumed, covering: those who have travelled directly from the region; people from expatriate and refugee communities in Europe and the Middle East; students already in the Middle East at the start of the Syrian conflict; and members of established ethnic communities outside the North Caucasus, most noticeably Kists from Georgia's Pankisi gorge, who belong to the same ethnic family as the Chechens and Ingush and who use al-Shishani (Arabic for Chechen) in their nom-de-guerres. Nevertheless, it is clear that many people have travelled from the North Caucasus itself. Chechnya's leader claimed that 484 had left the republic (“Ramzan Kadyrov” 2015), while security services in Dagestan, Ingushetia, Karachaevo-Cherkessia, and Kabardino-Balkaria have given figures of 912, 160, 152, and 130, respectively (“MVD Dagestana” 2016; “MVD” 2016; “Boleye 160 zhiteley” 2016; Ministry for Internal Affairs of the Karachaevo-Cherkessian Republic 2016). While allegations that Russian security services have actively facilitated the outflow of extremists from the region are impossible to independently verify, a qualitative change in security service pressure in the region before and after the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi (International Crisis Group 2016) appears to have encouraged departures, accelerated the decline of the domestic insurgency, and increased its vulnerability to external pressures.

The IK leadership's initial response to developments in Syria

From late 2010 onwards, IK leader Umarov (2006–2013) demonstrated an increased interest in global events and blurred a previously clear hierarchy of enemies that had hitherto

prioritized Russia (Youngman, forthcoming), and the involvement of North Caucasians in the Syrian conflict arguably accelerated this shift. In its initial response, the IK struggled to balance competing interests, attempting to support those fighting in Syria while simultaneously mitigating any negative impact on the domestic insurgency. Thus, in a November 2012 address to those “waging jihad in the Levant”, Umarov employed a form of counter-motivational framing to warn that people were falsely asserting,

there is no Jihad in the Caucasus, that Jihad in the Caucasus has finished, and therefore they supposedly arrived in Syria. No, in the Caucasus there is Jihad, and it is crueller and stronger than on the territory of Syria. No one helps or supports Jihad in the Caucasus. (Umarov 2012)

IK websites, meanwhile, published numerous articles arguing that fighting in the North Caucasus was *fard al-ayn* – a religious obligation incumbent on all able individuals – for North Caucasians, and that it was impermissible for people to wage jihad elsewhere solely because it was simple to do so. Instead, articles argued that people from the North Caucasus could only fight in Syria if there was no road back to the region (Youngman 2013). Such individuals included a number who became senior commanders in Syria having failed to find a way back into the Caucasus in 2012 (see, e.g. Margoshvili 2014).

Umarov’s death in September 2013 meant it fell to his successor to deal with the repercussions of the split in JMA’s ranks. Indicative of the high priority afforded to the Syrian conflict, Kebekov directly addressed those fighting in only his second address as leader. He portrayed the start of the conflict as something that had caused rejoicing, citing his own personal experience – he studied in Damascus between 2000 and 2005 (Kebekov 2014e) – and Judgment Day prophecies relating to the country. According to Kebekov’s statement in March 2014,

we encouraged our brothers to travel to Syria, and allowed them to go there when they asked about it, despite our extreme need of them.

However, he claimed that North Caucasians joining were instructed not to set up independent IK units, but to join “the very first of the *shari’ah jama’ats* fighting only under the banner of *tawhid* [monotheism]”, by which it later became clear he meant Jabhat al-Nusrah. Initially, he adopted a conciliatory position on the *fitna* (discord, internal strife) between IS and Jabhat al-Nusrah, calling on the two parties to negotiate and on North Caucasians not to participate (Kebekov 2014b). In doing so, he employed a framing strategy that was to be common to many of the North Caucasus leadership responses to Syria, emphasizing the importance of unity.

In a subsequent address devoted to the topic of *fitna*, issued in June 2014, Kebekov returned to this theme, stressing the need to be united and referencing “the very many *hadith* and *ayat* [Qur’anic verses]” on the topic. Thus, he drew on a subject, the need for Muslims to avoid internal strife, on which broad agreement exists across – in theory, if not in practice – and beyond jihadist groups to legitimize his position. However, he admitted that IK leaders had been less than united in the advice they had given to those travelling in Syria: whereas Kebekov has instructed people not to form independent IK units, Umarov had apparently ordered the opposite, something Kebekov criticized for undermining unity and hopes that fighters would return with combat experience. He also claimed that JMA could have avoided the *fitna* by simply joining

Jabhat al-Nusrah in the first place (Kebekov 2014d). Thus, unity framing served not only as a motivational device, but also as a means of criticizing the decisions of other actors – although the communication difficulties faced by the domestic insurgency, which are discussed below, are also important to considerations of such conflicting guidance.

A more ambiguous picture of the IK leadership's initial reaction to the Syrian conflict emerged in other ways, demonstrating the importance of approaching communiqués comprehensively rather than selectively. In his June 2014 address, Kebekov claimed, for example, that – far from unequivocally rejoicing, as he initially asserted – IK leaders were initially unsure how to respond. On the one hand, he cited *hadith* interpreted as advocating fighting in Syria. On the other, he referenced Qur'anic passages understood as instructing people to “fight the enemies who are closer to us” (Kebekov 2014d). In resolving this dilemma, Kebekov established a framing strategy that was to provide the foundation for IK resistance to IS: the notion of legitimate authority, in the form of “scholars directly linked to the jihad”. Thus, Kebekov argued in May 2014 that people did not need to travel to Syria, citing in support the absence of such a call by AQ leader Ayman al-Zawahiri. He went on to insist,

Not a single scholar or single jihad leader is calling you to go there. Yes, we know that if a caliphate is established somewhere and if we are called upon to go and fight together with them in order to spread the jihad and religion further, of course, we will accept that call first of all and will listen to and obey our emir. But at the moment it is better to stay at home and help the local mujahideen. (Kebekov 2014c)

In his address the following month, he similarly noted the absence of scholars calling on “brothers conducting jihad in the homeland” to head for Syria. Such statements appeared to be directed at external audiences and potential supporters to whom the Syrian conflict and IS in particular appealed, rather than those with direct links to the IK leadership. By contrast, it appears that the IK leadership saw benefits in some members of this latter group engaging with the Syrian conflict: for example, the official biography of Gadzhi Abdulayev, who later became Mountain Sector emir in Dagestan, claimed that he was dispatched by the IK leadership to Syria in 2013 to gain military experience (“Mukhlammad” 2015). In balancing these competing interests and concerns, Kebekov abandoned his conciliatory position on the IS-Jabhat al-Nusrah dispute, siding firmly with Al-Zawahiri's backing of the latter (Kebekov 2014d). In doing so, he clearly established Al-Zawahiri as an authority responsible for overall leadership of the jihad in Syria and moved the IK rhetorically closer to AQ than any previous leader of the North Caucasus insurgency.

The IS advance into the North Caucasus

The wave of defections to IS and the establishment of IS/CW marked a pivotal moment in the evolution of the North Caucasus insurgency, on a par with the 2007 decision to abolish the ChRI and proclaim the IK. Yet arguably the most noticeable feature of defecting leaders' communiqués is the paucity of explanation for their decision. Unlike for the IK, there were no founding documents or multiple lengthy statements justifying it. Dagestani rebel leaders were most active, with Asilderov, Khasavyurtovskiy *jama'at* and then Northern Sector emir Islam Muradov (Islam Abu Ibragim), and Southern Sector emir Gasan Abdullayev (Abu-Yasir) seeking to explain their decision. However, the entire

communicative output for rebels in Dagestan, spanning more than 13 months, amounted to less than two hours of video, and this low figure was certainly not a consequence of clarity and concision. Multiple statements consisted of a formulaic pledge with no explanation. The situation was even more marked in the other North Caucasian republics, with Chechen, Ingushetian, and Kabardino-Balkarian rebel leaders issuing only 37, 11, and 5 minutes of video, respectively.¹¹ By comparison, Kebekov responded in depth, with a single communiqué accounting for almost an hour's worth of video.

Such a paucity of explanation was equally evident in the content. If leadership communiqués form part of a strategy “to convince sceptical audiences to see the world in their terms” (Crenshaw 2011, 88) – one of the aims of groups employing terrorism – one would expect groups switching allegiance to devote time to a prognostic framing strategy that explains the superiority of their solution to others. This would appear to be particularly true in circumstances where rival groups seek to differentiate themselves or leaders seek to legitimize their position in a power struggle with others – especially in circumstances, like that facing IK and IS/CW leaders, where groups share a common understanding of the problems and must seek alternative avenues for differentiation. It also remains true where the focus is on internal audiences, since leaders have an incentive to persuade other insurgents with whom they might not be able to communicate directly (see discussion below) to support them and not their rivals. Yet defecting leaders devoted remarkably little time to any form of prognostic framing. While Asilderov praised IS in January 2015 for “following the true path” and Abdullayev portrayed the pledge of *bayah* as being in line with long-standing goals (Asilderov, Kambulatov, and Abdullayev 2015), both neglected any discussion of what would make IS/CW a more viable solution than the IK to the problems they envisioned the North Caucasus and the insurgency as facing. Nor did any defecting rebel leaders give details of what being part of the “caliphate” would mean for the region or devote any time to advocating alternative tactics in order to change the status quo.

Redirecting the emotional appeal of the “caliphate”

Any form of motivation is not solely cognitive, but also highly emotional (Gamson 1992, 32). By extension, motivational framing must operate on the emotional as well as rational level. The study of the role of emotion in social movements, however, has until recently remained largely neglected: not only because “salient emotions are often vague and difficult to identify except through the very actions they are meant to explain” (Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta 2000, 69), but because the field of social movement studies itself was in part defined by an “intellectual rebellion” against portrayals of movements as irrational crowds manipulated by demagogues (Calhoun 2001, 48). The communiqués of IS/CW leaders, however, provide grounds for arguing that they have sought to rely on emotion rather than rational argumentation in order to win support.

Firstly, the very notion of a “caliphate” is a utopian project that draws on nostalgia for the past (real or imagined). As such, it therefore has a clear emotional component, since nostalgia is by definition something emotional, and to restrict understandings of utopian projects to their cognitive dimensions is to miss a considerable part of their appeal. The defections in the North Caucasus occurred after and frequently referenced precisely the proclamation of the “caliphate”, rather than the Syrian conflict generally or the previous

existence of the IS of Iraq and the Levant, neglect of which detail appears to unduly downplay the significance of that proclamation. A counterfactual is, of course, impossible to prove, but whether groups in the North Caucasus would have pledged allegiance to those in Syria and Iraq absent the proclamation of the “caliphate” at least warrants consideration.

Secondly, while capturing emotional appeals is methodologically challenging, the coding schema used to analyse communiqués showed that several IS/CW leaders explicitly referenced the positive emotions that the proclamation – and their own decision to pledge *bayah* to it – evoked. Asilderov, for example, described the proclamation as “a joyous day for us”, a “long-awaited day”, and the subject of discussions preceding the actual proclamation (Asilderov 2014; Asilderov, Kambulatov, and Abdullayev 2015). Tsumadinskiy *jama’at* emir Magomed Abdulkhalikov (Abu Muaz) in January 2015 similarly effused:

We are happy that our emir, Abu Mukhammad, the emir of Dagestan, has sworn an oath of allegiance. [...] I lack words to express everything – how happy we are. Only God knows how happy we are that the Caliphate has been declared. (Abdulkhalikov 2015)

Less explicitly, but equally rooted in emotional appeals of belonging, several leaders drew on the same theme of unity articulated by Kebekov. Abdullayev, for example, in January 2015 framed the decision to join IS in terms of achieving a long-sought-after unity of purpose:

We waited for this unification for so long. We wanted to unite and God made it possible for us to unite. He gave us a caliphate and said: unite. We can see now who are hypocrites and who had some other aims. Who were sincere in their words when they said that they were hoping for unification and that we should unite. And God gave us the Islamic State, ruled by God’s laws and with an elected caliph. (Asilderov, Kambulatov, and Abdullayev 2015)

He also sought to portray the “caliphate” as offering the only opportunity for such unity:

If you fail to respond to the Caliphate today, if you fail to respond to God’s religion, God may not give you the second chance, brothers. (Usman, Sumaya, and Abdullayev 2014)

IS/CW leaders thus sought to depict the world in Manichean terms, whereby the “whole world is divided into two parts – those who support the Caliphate and those who fight the Caliphate” (Asilderov 2014). By default, therefore, those who failed to align with IS were guilty of undermining unity and aligning with the infidel.

Finally, the reliance on emotion rather than rationality as the basis for appeal is evidenced by the aforementioned paucity of explanation. The most common form of communiqué announcing a change of allegiance was that of a leader or leaders sitting in front of a flag, reading a formulaic pledge. For many, this was their sole statement on the issue. Chechen emir Byutukayev, for example, issued two such pledges in June 2015, first as audio and then as video (2015a, 2015c). Although he attributed his failure to comment in the six months following Asilderov’s pledge to ill health, he did not offer any prognostic framing or detailed discussions of the reason for the decision – despite it being of a magnitude as to deprive the IK of representation in its historic core. The defection of Ingushetia’s emir was similarly formulaic (Makhauri 2015b). Leaders drew on audience awareness of IS – evidenced by the outflow of people from

the region and in-communicé references to IS Russian-language output – and used the symbology of *bayah* as a shorthand for IS’ ideology. This left the details to the imagination of the audience, with the gaps to be filled by the heavy reliance on the emotional themes of belonging and utopianism present in core IS propaganda (Winter 2015).

Arguing that IS/CW leaders relied on emotional rather than rational appeal is not to argue that their approach was irrational – a flawed dichotomy that has already been comprehensively challenged (Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta 2000, 2001). Instead, it can be seen as an entirely rational strategy, since it allowed IS/CW leaders to sidestep the need for complex arguments vulnerable to superior counter-arguments. On the one hand, the defecting leadership were ill-equipped to enter into theological debates with the likes of Kebekov or Suleymanov, whose level of religious education far exceeded their own. On the other hand, by the time of their defections, the insurgency was in a parlous state – with its long-term decline exacerbated by the twin pressures of sustained security service operations initially designed to secure the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi and the conflict in Syria – and justifying the decision through rational explanations of how it would fundamentally change the situation in the North Caucasus is no easy feat. Put simply, IS/CW leaders may not have possessed coherent answers to such questions even if they believed it to be true. Finally, recent research has argued that bonds, kinship, and a sense of relatedness – all of which operate at least as much at the emotional and subconscious as at the rational level – inform decisions of whether to travel to foreign conflicts (Moore 2015). Several statements suggest a desire to tap into these processes and redirect the emotional appeal of the “caliphate” back into the domestic insurgency by arguing that being part of the “caliphate” negated any need to leave the region. Thus Abdullayev claimed in September 2015 that IS valued people working in situ, and therefore people should join local groups. Per his view, only women, children and the elderly were encouraged to migrate to the core territories of the “caliphate” (Abdullayev 2015). Asilderov similarly argued in the same month:

To all the brothers who still have doubts about where one should wage jihad, we ask that you obey the order of the caliph and qadi of the caliphate and participate, I have in mind the [indistinct], the Muslims of the Caucasus, so that you strive to wage jihad on the lands of the Caucasus. (Asilderov, Muradov, and Abdullayev 2015)

Such a redirection of emotions served a highly pragmatic purpose that was not at all irrational to those seeking to sustain and rejuvenate the domestic insurgency.

Legitimate authority and the rejection of IS

Whereas IS/CW leaders relied on emotional appeal, the remaining IK leadership focused on rational argument, in particular on the notion of legitimate authority that Kebekov had articulated prior to the split. Kebekov, in a statement published in December 2014, described making decisions without the requisite *dalil* (proof, evidence) to be “one of the worst mistakes in jihad” and claimed that it was vital to follow jihadist scholars to avoid this:

The third commandment is to consult scholars and knowledgeable people if you do not know something. [...] Consulting such scholars and knowledgeable people is the same as consulting the Revelation, and by respecting them you respect the revelation.

Among those identified as possessing the requisite authority were prominent jihadist luminaries like Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, Hani al-Sibai, Abu Qatada al-Filistini, and Zawahiri. He went on to characterize failing to consult such scholars as “Satan’s doing” and criticized people who rejected them for not simultaneously being fighters (Kebekov 2014f). Prior to the split, in August 2014, Suleymanov likewise rooted his opposition to IS in jihadist scholarship, listing many of the same scholars to support his assertion that people should not travel to Syria (Suleymanov 2014a). Responding to Asilderov’s pledge several months later, he accused those who pledged allegiance to IS of “showing their disrespect to scholars” and erroneously thinking that, “by taking up arms, he has become a big scholar, a *qadi*, a mufti” (Suleymanov 2014c). Much like Kebekov, Suleymanov claimed that the pledges of *bayah* posed a threat to unity, arguing the defectors were “taking a step toward *fitna*” (Suleymanov 2014b) and rejecting the legitimacy of IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’s claim to be “caliph”:

None of the scholars and emirs have recognised him as caliph. And whoever gives him an oath opens the road to bloodshed and division between Muslims. (Suleymanov 2014c)

Kebekov scathingly dismissed the defecting emirs as “simpletons” and instructed them to migrate to areas under IS control if they wanted to join the “caliphate” (Kebekov 2014g). Neither he nor Suleymanov rejected the notion of a caliphate in principle, as indicated by Kebekov’s May 2014 statement cited above. Instead, in January 2015 he insisted:

we make every effort to implement God’s ruling and to establish a rightly-guided caliphate following the prophet’s methodology.

However, he argued that the “required conditions cited by past and present Sunni scholars” had not been met. He went on to outline a number of “points of disagreement” that precluded the possibility of supporting IS:

Their holding Muslims to be nonbelievers, their lack of concern over the shedding of impermissible blood, their establishment of the caliphate without seeking the consent of the Muslims, and their rejection of the establishment of a court to decide between them and the [other] mujahideen.

He also called into question al-Baghdadi’s ability to protect Muslims in the territories over which he claimed dominion, challenging him to send just “one single soldier” to support the Caucasus insurgency (Kebekov 2015).

Both Kebekov and Suleymanov possessed religious training and occupied positions of religious rather than military authority within the insurgency prior to assuming overall leadership. As such, their reliance on religious scholarship was logical. Asilderov, by contrast, lacked such a background and, although he criticized opponents of IS for citing

scholars who have not visited the caliphate’s territory themselves and have not met the caliph and have currently no direct connection to jihad

he did not himself cite any alternative Qur’anic or scholarly guidance (Asilderov, Kambulatov, and Abdullayev 2015). A paucity of such citations in other IS/CW communiqués was also evident. However, even Kabardino-Balkarian emir Shebzukhov, who possessed no such authority, in January 2015 rejected IS/CW on similar grounds to Kebekov and Suleymanov:

important information should be referred to people who are capable of analysing it through the prism of their correct opinions and righteous knowledge. [...] All of them [respected scholars] state unanimously that Abu-Bakr al-Baghdadi is not the caliph of the Muslims. People who do not listen to scholars and emirs inevitably stray from the direct path and bring dissent into the Muslim community. (Shebzukhov 2015a)

In December 2015 he again criticized defectors for failing to respect not only scholars generally, but Kebekov and Suleymanov specifically, and claimed that IS/CW leaders had succumbed to the age-old strategy of dividing the enemy (Shebzukhov 2015b). Dagestani emir Saidov similarly called on people to “follow the scholars of jihad” (2015).

Contrasting sources of authority

IK leaders’ reliance on rational argumentation was evident in how they chose to communicate: whereas IS/CW leaders eschewed detailed explanations, IK leaders embraced them. Kebekov, for example, issued a 4000-word Arabic-language letter to “idle students” urging them to support the jihad, and several videos clocked in at around an hour. Even his response to Asilderov’s pledge was buried a third of the way through an hour-long video that was in itself the second instalment of a lecture. Suleymanov was even drier in his approach, frequently communicating in Avar via “videos” that consisted of a still image of him and a rolling Russian translation of the audio. This reliance on rationality arguably limited their appeal. Yet it also carries important implications for the reconcilability of surviving IK and IS/CW factions: Any presumption that all groups would simply switch to IS/CW ignores the conflicting sources from which they sought to draw their authority and base their appeal. Even though Shebzukhov admitted in his December 2015 address (Shebzukhov 2015b) that a change of tactics were long needed, this did not translate into accepting IS as the solution. By this point, Kebekov, Suleymanov, and almost all of the other prominent leaders who had remained loyal to the IK were dead; even if pledging allegiance to IS acted as a means of legitimizing rival Kabardino-Balkarian emir Zankishiyev’s bid for power within the republic – which is certainly plausible – this does not convincingly explain Shebzukhov’s position. On the one hand, he could have neutralized that bid by himself pledging allegiance to IS, which would not have required an unprecedented volte-face; he could, for example, have claimed Kebekov’s death meant he was not betraying his oath to him and prioritized the need for unity, echoing arguments that North Caucasian commanders in Syria used in relation to Umarov. Zankishiyev had, after all, not been officially recognized in his position by either IS central or recognized IS/CW leaders in Dagestan. On the other hand, he could have strengthened his own bid by claiming leadership of the entire IK, given that he was the only republic-level leader still in the region. The irreconcilability of the IK position was illustrated by a statement posted in September 2015 to Hunafa, the “official” website of the IK’s Ingushetian branch, which asserted that the website’s administrators had no one left in the republic to cooperate with but were nevertheless unwilling to support IS/CW or hand over control of the website (“Ot administratsii sayta” 2015). In other words, they were still unwilling to accept the legitimacy of IS even after they admitted they had lost the fight with it. Interesting in suggesting a disconnect between the insurgency’s online and extraterritorial presence (most of the websites being managed from outside the conflict zone) and the views on the ground, none of the IK websites switched over to IS/CW.

Digital dependency and negotiating ideological change

Leadership communiqués are readily understood as outward-facing appeals to supporters and sympathizers, and as messages to opponents. Yet they play an equally important internal organizational role, as groups and their leaders seek to overcome the communication and operational difficulties facing clandestine groups. For security reasons, it was not possible for all rebel leaders to meet, a fact acknowledged in multiple communiqués over the years. Indeed, attempts to do so resulted in significant leadership losses – the bulk of the remaining IK leadership, for example, were killed in a prolonged special operation in August 2015 when Suleymanov, Saidov, and Abdulayev sought to meet in Dagestan’s Untsukul’skiy *rayon*. Such difficulties created a reliance on video and audio messages exchanged via courier and via the Internet. This was a variant on a long-standing approach with equally long-standing problems. ChRI President Maskhadov (1997–2005), for example, relied on cassettes to communicate with the insurgency’s representatives, but couriers were forced to wait for opportunities to move safely and were frequently arrested and their tapes confiscated (Akhmadov and Daniloff 2013). In modern insurgent communications, cassettes have been replaced by USB flash drives, and insurgent leaders make frequent references to their use.

A reliance on digital communications creates numerous problems for groups. Firstly, they introduce considerable delays in decision-making, leaving groups unable to respond rapidly to events. It took, for example, six months to announce Umarov’s successor because of the time required to resolve disagreements over who should replace him, during which time the Chechen authorities intercepted and released one of the messages (Kebekov 2014a). Opening communication channels also creates security vulnerabilities, since these same channels can be used to trace insurgent leaders – a fact often unacknowledged in discussions of the advantages afforded by modern Internet and social media capabilities. Finally, website administrators are actors in their own right, and can pursue their own agendas independent of the rebel leadership on the ground. In the most blatant example, Byutukayev’s statement explaining his silence on IS/CW formed part of an address expressing condolences on the death of Kebekov. Speaking in Chechen, he called on his “brothers to translate this clip to make it understandable” (Byutukayev 2015b). Yet when prominent IK website *Kavkazcenter* obliged, it edited out the comments relating to IS, depriving non-Chechen-speaking audiences of access to them.

Facing inwards

These issues are highly pertinent to considerations of the ideological fracturing of the insurgency. With the split, fellow leaders and insurgents emerged as a primary audience of communiqués, and this internal organizational function came to the fore. North Caucasus insurgent leaders thus demonstrated a greater concern with what Cordes (2001) labelled *auto-propaganda*, that is, seeking to persuade themselves and each other, than *propaganda*, that is, seeking to persuade those outside the group. In his pledge of *bayah*, for example, Asilderov appealed to Kebekov and other emirs,

not to drag their feet over this and to give their oath of allegiance too. Everything is moving that way in any case, sooner or later. You have to understand this.

He went on to claim that his group had waited six months before pledging because they wanted Kebekov to do so first, and only took the step when it became clear that he was not prepared to do so. That the primary audience of his address was fellow insurgent leaders was made transparent in his instruction to “people who have no relation to jihad not to comment on this. This has nothing to do with you” (Asilderov 2014). In a January 2015 address, Asilderov repeated this exhortation, insisting those outside Dagestan “do not have the slightest idea” about the situation there (Asilderov, Kambulatov, and Abdullayev 2015). Other defecting leaders similarly used their addresses to appeal to their counterparts, both within the insurgency and in IS itself (Asilderov and Khalid 2015; Asilderov, Muradov, and Abdullayev 2015; Usman, Sumaya, and Abdullayev 2014; Makhauri 2015a) – more so than explicitly appealed to those outside the insurgency. The response of IK leaders was similarly internally focused, such that Shebzukhov complained in December 2015,

How many times have we talked about unity? Earlier, in the main all of our addresses were directed towards Muslims on the sidelines with the aim of awakening them, inspiring them to join the jihad. Now we are thrown back, today we have to appeal to the mujahideen themselves, inspiring them to unity. (Shebzukhov 2015b)

Exacerbating ideological differences

The internal focus of communiqués helps shed light on the manner in which groups negotiate ideological change. Asilderov’s appeal to Kebekov and his remark about switching to IS point to rebel leaders applying pressure to their nominal superiors within the IK hierarchy. Shamilkalinskiy *jama’at* emir Arsanali Kambulatov (Abu Mukhammad (Aga-chaulskiy)) explicitly acknowledged this bottom-up process when he reported telling Asilderov:

if we do not swear allegiance we will not be able to keep the mujahideen and, if you do not do that, then I will do that. (Asilderov, Kambulatov, and Abdullayev 2015)

Such an ultimatum echoed one given to Umarov about the proclamation of the IK (Youngman, forthcoming), but whereas Umarov demonstrated ideological flexibility to maintain movement unity, Kebekov adopted a rigid position that ultimately led to the fracturing of the insurgency. Arguably, as a military leader, Umarov could afford to be flexible without risk of losing credibility in a way that an ideological leader like Kebekov could not. Yet this appears incomplete as a primary explanation for the split. Competition over the direction of the insurgency was nothing new, but it appears that the insurgency’s communication difficulties greatly inhibited the IK leadership’s ability to manage these internal pressures and keep disagreements in-house, exacerbating the apparent ideological differences between groups. Asilderov, for example, claimed that he had been unable to meet Kebekov to resolve their differences (Asilderov, Kambulatov, and Abdullayev 2015). Byutukayev reported recording a message for Kebekov with his views on the “caliphate” but receiving no response for several months before the latter’s death (Byutukayev 2015b). Even leaders on the same side of the ideological divide reported difficulties: Kambulatov claimed that he had sent many messages on USB sticks to groups that also joined IS/CW without response (Asilderov, Kambulatov, and Abdullayev 2015). Many groups appeared to make their decisions in isolation, with a lack of coordination as

important as the irreconcilability of positions in producing disagreement. Supporting the idea that communication difficulties exacerbated ideological differences – and highlighting the importance of personal networks – there do not appear to have been any instances where leaders who could meet (evidenced by co-appearances in videos in 2014 and 2015) ended up on alternate sides of the IK–IS/CW divide.

Further evidence of the weakly coordinated, bottom-up nature of the split is provided by the visual content and distribution of the communiqués themselves. In performing their symbolic pledge of *bayah*, leaders showed little concern for consistency or awareness of how to maximize emotional appeal. For example, defecting IS/CW groups used a range of black flags inscribed with the *shahada*, the Islamic profession of faith, rather than just the version commonly associated with IS. By itself, this is perhaps not as surprising as it might first appear, since iconography crosses “what might appear to be ideological boundaries easily” (Ramsay 2013, 63). However, combined with other features, it appears more significant. Introductory sequences were often entirely lacking, or were poorly edited cuts from IS videos. Audio quality was often low, with poor microphone placement and frequent interference. The distribution strategy was equally haphazard, often relying on isolated social media accounts that meant videos sometimes had negligible viewing figures or were only picked up by more prominent websites and social media accounts days or weeks after their original posting. Partly, this was a consequence of IK websites – which have previously demonstrated high levels of sophistication in video production – not switching sides. Yet the absence of the very social media sophistication and emotional appeal that has distinguished IS’ own videos testifies to the absence of a centrally driven, considered communication and branding strategy and cautions against hyped threat assessments that view groups as becoming more potent purely by aligning with IS.

Conclusion

The picture that emerges from examining the communiqués of North Caucasus rebel leaders is somewhat ambiguous as to the role that ideology has played in the splintering of the insurgency. On the one hand, there are clear differences in the articulated ideologies of groups on either side of the IK–IS/CW divide. IS/CW leaders have focused on the emotional appeal of the “caliphate”, with the apparent goal of redirecting it back into the domestic insurgency, and have devoted little time to articulating an alternative strategy or explaining why allying with IS is preferable. IK leaders, by contrast, have appealed to rationality and based their opposition on the opinion of jihadist scholars who reject the legitimacy of the “caliphate”. On the other hand, such differences do not necessarily exclude the possibility that leaders have pledged allegiance to IS because they see material benefits in doing so or see it as able to offer legitimacy in a power struggle with competing factions. Ultimately, it is impossible to assess the sincerity and motivations behind the different strategies. That being said, however, dismissing the differences between the factions encounters the same problems as purely instrumental explanations for ideology. Ideology employed pragmatically or instrumentally is not necessarily sincere or irrelevant, not least because it presumes that ideology to be important to the targets of that instrumentality and ideologically driven actors may simultaneously be highly pragmatic. Moreover, pragmatic or instrumental explanations – the need to stem the outflow of people from the North Caucasus to Syria or the need for external support – fail to fully

explain why some leaders remained loyal to the IK. This is particularly true for Kabardino-Balkarian emir Shebzukhov, who continued to reject IS even after the death of most of the remaining IK leadership. While ideology may be of uncertain significance to decisions to defect to IS, there appear to be stronger grounds for asserting that it was important to the emergence of a split, rather than the insurgency pledging allegiance wholesale.

Despite these differences, however, it is clear that communication difficulties have had a significant impact on leaders' ability to negotiate ideological change. Those leaders who were unable to meet in person relied on video messages delivered either directly on USB sticks or via the Internet, but could rely neither on them reaching their destination nor on receiving a response. Where they could meet and coordinate, they appeared able to avoid public differences. Thus, ideology may be important to the split, but it is clearly incapable of explaining it on its own. Debates about the direction of the insurgency have been a recurring feature for many years – unsurprisingly so given its long-term downward trajectory – yet maintaining a broad umbrella movement that affords its components considerable autonomy appears to have been viewed as more beneficial to all parties than the creation of rival groups. In this regard, it is important to acknowledge that communiqués have clear limitations in fully explaining the differences between groups, even if they currently represent the best available evidence. First and foremost, not all of the debates occur in the public domain, and there are numerous references in those that do to private discussions. If communiqués are understood as important to groups as a means of overcoming communication difficulties, then logically they must be considered less significant where such difficulties are reduced and groups *can* meet. Debates only become visible when groups attempt to communicate beyond the circles with which physical contact is possible; when groups bid for external support and, essentially, wash their dirty linen in public; or when private communications are leaked into the public domain. When these circumstances do not occur, the debates and, potentially, ideological tensions remain hidden from view. While this does not invalidate the insights gained from groups' communiqués, it is nevertheless important that all that *can be seen* is not mistaken for *all that there is to see*.

A question not addressed thus far is whether the differences between the factions matter, given that the IK has been decimated by the defections and special operations and, at the time of writing in May 2016, has been leaderless for nine months, with Shebzukhov its sole prominent remaining leader. This author, unsurprisingly, contends that they do indeed matter, for several reasons. Firstly, regardless of the IK's future, it is important to understand the origins of IS/CW, how its leaders have responded to the Syrian conflict, and on what it seeks to base its support. Understanding how actors view the world is important to understanding their behaviour and countering their attempts to persuade others to share that worldview. Secondly, the ambiguity evident in IS/CW leaders' communiqués and the failure to articulate a clear set of goals or tactics or explicitly explain IS' ideology suggests an effort to accommodate as broad a range of views as possible. This, together with the apparently decentralized nature of the defections, cautions against treating the group as a unitary actor that will simply reflect the ideology of IS itself, which in turn suggests that analysis of the statements and actions of IS proper may not yield many insights into the behaviour of its North Caucasian branch. Thirdly, the focus on internal audiences offers a means of interpreting IS/CW's lack of activity and suggests that, as Campana and Ratelle (2014) have previously found, the insurgency

is, in the short term at least, focused on survival rather than implementing a grand strategy. Finally, the evidence of debates outside the public domain – including by actors in Turkey – and the intransigence of IK loyalists, including Shebzukhov and IK website administrators, cautions against viewing the IK as dead. Even if it no longer exists in its previous form, the distinctness of the position adopted by its supporters and the existence of North Caucasian insurgents in Syria opposed to IS suggest they will remain separate from IS/CW and may, for want of an alternative, seek to resurrect the IK in some way or other.

Notes

1. In November 2014, self-proclaimed Aukhovskiy *jama'at* leader Suleyman Zaynalabidov became the region's first rebel leader to publicly pledge allegiance. However, several details argue against taking this as the start of IS' public presence in the region. The Aukhovskiy *jama'at* is a small group that was officially subordinate to the Khasavyurtovskiy *jama'at* within the IK hierarchy. However, Zaynalabidov was not recognized by the IK or the Khasavyurtovskiy *jama'at*, which instead appointed its own Aukhovskiy emir, meaning he led only a splinter faction of an already small group. The Khasavyurtovskiy *jama'at* was also one of the first groups to pledge allegiance to IS, making a split on ideological grounds unlikely. Most tellingly, the circumstances in which his pledge came to light and subsequent provocative statements were highly suspicious, with a website linked to the Dagestani security services bringing the pledge to the attention of a broader public. For these reasons, this splinter faction's communiqués are excluded from this paper.
2. Statement posted via *Twitter user* Abu-Ja'far (@_Mkhawi4) on 23 June 2015. The account was subsequently suspended and the direct URL is unknown. A summary of the statement is available from Joscelyn (2015).
3. For simplicity's sake, all defecting groups will be referred to as IS/CW, although the organization of this name only came into existence several months after Asildero's defection. Similarly, IS will be used throughout, although prior to the proclamation of a "caliphate" in June 2014 the group was known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant/Syria (ISIL/ISIS).
4. Jihadism is used here to refer to "forms of Islamist militancy defined above all by a commitment to violence ostensibly in the name of Islam" (Deol and Kazmi 2012, 1). This is preferred to the more widely used term of Jihadi-Salafism, referring to the violent strand of a broad movement adhering to literalist interpretations of Islamic scripture and advocating a return to a golden age of Islam (Meijer 2009). As Ramsay points out (2013, 52–53), this term is problematic in that it refers to "two quite different groupings of religious and social phenomena"; key "jihadi" thinkers such as Abdallah Azzam were not Salafis according to at least one of them; and groups like Hamas suggest the existence of a distinctly non-Salafi jihadism. Equally problematic, labelling all violent Islamic actors as Jihadi-Salafi places theology at the centre of understanding of their beliefs and behaviours, since a Jihadi-Salafi so defined cannot, for example, be indifferent to interpretations of scripture. In reality, such actors can and often are unaware of or disinterested in theological debates.
5. As typologies are drawn from groups' expressed political preferences, it is irrelevant that the North Caucasian authorities do not enjoy sovereignty, since sub-state actors engaged in the region's armed conflict are unanimous in rejecting the legitimacy of Russia's presence.
6. Toft and Zhukov (2015), for example, claim to compare Islamist or nationalist groups based on media reporting of their attacks. Where a perpetrating group is "unknown or unidentified", the authors claim to categorize on the basis of its pursuit of explicitly Islamist or nationalist objectives and their use/non-use of Islamist rhetoric. However, what constitutes Islamist or nationalist objectives is left undefined, nor is it explained how such a determination can be made if the actor is unknown or unidentified. Given that perpetrators are frequently not

specified in media reporting on the contemporary insurgency, this significantly undermines any conclusions drawn from the data about ideology.

7. The contested nature of terrorism is well documented (see Schmid 2012). This paper understands terrorism as premeditated unlawful violence or the credible threat thereof, directed against non-combatants by sub-state actors, primarily for political purposes and intended to influence an audience beyond its direct target. Central to this definition is an understanding of violence as a tactic, rather than a defining characteristic of “terrorist” groups.
8. Figures in the table refer to the number of videos. Numerous communiqués featured more than one rebel leader, in which case they are assigned to the category of the highest ranking. Only rebel leaders who speak in videos are counted.
9. Snow et al. (1986) identify frame transformation as involving redefining already meaningful activities and events to match a new framework and attach new meanings.
10. Salakhuddin al-Shishani’s real identity was unknown for a long time; he appears to have used multiple names, including Feizul Baysarov and Feyzulla Margoshvili, to foster confusion over his identity and citizenship to avoid extradition to Russia. For more on Salakhuddin’s background, see Paraszczuk (2015).
11. These figures include timings for videos omitted from analysis for the reasons outlined previously.

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