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The North Caucasus Insurgency: a Potential Spillover into the Russian Federation?¹

By Jean-François Ratelle (University of Ottawa)

Abstract

This contribution investigates the causes behind the downfall of the North Caucasus insurgency focusing on the pre-Sochi counter-insurgency and the massive outflow of foreign fighters to Syria and Iraq. In order to do so, this article provides a short historical background on the North Caucasus insurgency since the establishment of the Caucasus Emirate and discusses the threat of foreign fighters returning to the North Caucasus. It argues that although the insurgency has been crushed and entered a latent and incipient stage in 2014, the potential return of foreign fighters coupled with the recurrent discriminatory policies against Islam in Russia and the Islamic State's online propaganda might trigger a new spillover and upsurge of insurgent violence outside of the North Caucasus.

The Rise and Fall of the *Imarat Kavkaz* (2007–2014)

In October 2007, Dokka Umarov proclaimed the establishment of the Caucasus Emirate in order to unite all the Islamic militants across the Caucasus.² The new theocratic organization replaced the ethno-nationalist Chechen Republic of Ichkeria (ChRI) even if it retained its existing military fronts including those outside of the region. With a very limited flow of foreign money and fighters coming from Muslim countries,³ IK remained a parochial organization led by former Chechen nationalists focusing mainly on local imperatives and the struggle against the Russian state. Based on a group of local loyal militants to the Chechen movement, the new underground Islamist *jamaats*⁴ were designed as a vector of radicalization amongst young Muslims in the North Caucasus. Their recruitment was greatly facilitated by Moscow's repressive policies against "non-traditional" Islam⁵ as well as the socio-political problems in the region such as corruption, lack of political liberties,

and limited social mobility and economic perspectives. The strength and the capacities of those networks significantly grew in Ingushetia and in Dagestan, transforming each republic into a hub of insurgent violence.

Between 2008 and 2012, the organization enjoyed rapid military successes using guerrilla warfare against Russian forces throughout the North Caucasus (Chechnya, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, and Dagestan). It developed a decentralized network of resistance in order to increase the resilience of the organization where each local *jamaat* managed its own finances, strategic and tactical choices, and recruitment activities. The epicentre of insurgent violence moved from Chechnya to Dagestan and Ingushetia in 2009, transforming the regional distribution of fighters. However, insurgent attacks and casualties gradually declined in the North Caucasus from its peak in 2010 and 2011. After 2012, attacks conducted by the underground Islamist North Caucasus insurgency dropped by roughly 70 to 80 percent. Most experts attribute such a drastic reduction in insurgent activities to effective Russian counter-insurgency (COIN) operations on the eve of the Sochi Olympics—including high-value target (HVT) assassinations against high-ranking field commanders (ICG 2016; Ratelle 2016; Youngman 2016; Souleimanov 2017).

During pre-Sochi COIN operations in 2012 and 2013, Dagestan was severely diminished as an insurgent hub. In 2012 and 2013, over 400 militants were reportedly killed, compared to only 73 in 2011. Russian successes in COIN were the result of infiltration operations inside insurgent groups leading to a series of high-value target assassinations by security forces in Dagestan, Chechnya, and Kabardino-Balkaria (Souleimanov 2017). Between 2013 and 2015, Russian forces were able to eliminate the majority of the members of IK's leadership, including Dokku Umarov in September 2013 and his two successors. Following Umarov's death, IK entered a state of organizational decline. The success

1 This research was supported by the Nuclear Threat Initiative.

2 IK was designated as a terrorist organization by the United States in 2011.

3 For a different assessment regarding Middle Eastern funding to the North Caucasus insurgency, refer to Hahn (2014: 81–82).

4 In this context, *jamaats* refers to insurgent groups built around Islamic communities.

5 Traditional Islam is often depicted as a form of popular Islam (folk Islam) rooted in ethno-national traditions such as pre-Islamic *adat* (customary norms) associated with Sufism in Russia. It is linked to state-sponsored Islam mainly controlled by local Spiritual Boards of Muslims, but can also be associated with Kadyrov-imposed austere Islam in Chechnya. Traditional Islam is established as a binary opposition to non-traditional Islam which usually refers to perceived foreign Islamic ideologies imported to Russia such as Wahhabism, Salafism, and Hizb ut-Tahrir. Non-traditional Islam usually engages in religious political activism, challenges the local ethno-national roots of traditional Islam as well as the religious monopoly imposed by state-sponsored Islam in Russia.

of Russian COIN operations reduced the North Caucasus insurgency's strength and capacity, forcing it into a latent and incipient stage. The difficult vetting process in recruitment activities put in place to counter infiltration further limited the insurgency's capacity to replenish its ranks, leading to a marked decrease in insurgent activities. As matter of comparison, various North Caucasus insurgent *jamaats* killed over 500 Russian security forces in 2010 and 2011, compared to only 51 in 2015 and 2016. Furthermore, IK's down-spiraling capacity undermined its racketeering operations, threatening the organization's operational survival.

IK's position was further weakened by the massive outflow of young Islamists from the North Caucasus for *Hijrah* (migration of Muslims toward the Middle East for armed jihad) to Syria and Iraq, which continued largely unabated until early 2015 (ICG 2016; Ratele 2016; Youngman 2016). The Islamic State's military success in 2014, along with its pretensions to the reestablishment of the Caliphate, attracted an important number of alienated North Caucasus Salafists or would-be insurgents. Many Salafists (including non-combatants) chose to leave Russia in response to state repression against non-traditional forms of Islam, as well as due to the economic crisis following international sanctions against Russia in 2014. Large Middle East migrations (*Hijrah* and economic migration) further crippled the logistical network of the North Caucasus insurgency and sapped its support amongst the local population. It also demonstrates that the pool of IK combatants and supporters in the North Caucasus was limited.

Amidst IK's decline and IS' perceived rise in Syria and Iraq, several field commanders defected from IK and pledged allegiance to IS in 2014 and 2015, leading to a change in leadership and growing ties between the North Caucasus insurgency, the conflict in Syria, and the Global Jihad overall. Between high casualties, out-migration, and desertion, a more radical fringe of insurgents rose to prominence in the North Caucasus, facilitating the development of IS ideology in the region. One can observe a generational change between veterans of the two Chechen wars and a younger generations of Salafi-jihadist insurgents reared on IS globalist messaging.

Over time, several other IK-affiliated field commanders defected to IS, further endangering IK's survival in the North Caucasus (Youngman 2016). Faced with a crumbling insurgency and unable to replenish their ranks or obtain resources to attract new recruits, these field commanders sought IS support to revitalize the resistance against Russian authorities. In June 2015, IS and its spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani announced the establishment of *Wilayat Qawqaz*—the

Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, Caucasus Province (IS/CW).⁶ Rostam Asilderov, former commander of the IK Dagestani military province (*Vilayat*), was appointed head of IS/CW. Even though IS leaders are not directly involved with any decisions linked to the underground insurgency in the North Caucasus, their official brand offered a symbolic support to the most extremist elements within the insurgency.

The Islamic State in the North Caucasus and the Danger of Returnees from Syria and Iraq

Although severely weakened, the North Caucasus insurgency, mostly driven by IS-affiliated fighters, has begun to reorganize and plan limited attacks against security forces and terrorist attacks outside of the North Caucasus. In the last year, the Russian government has thwarted several potential terrorist attacks allegedly linked to IS or IK. In August 2016, the Russian government killed four IK militants during a counterterrorist operation in St. Petersburg, including Zelim Shebzukhov. Shebzukhov was one of the most important field commanders in the North Caucasus (Kabardino-Balkaria) and was officially on Russia's federal wanted list. Around the same period, IS also claimed responsibility for its first attack outside of the North Caucasus targeting a police post near Moscow. More recently, in December 2016, the Federal Security Service (FSB) detained seven militants in Dagestan planning terrorist attacks in Moscow for New Year's celebrations. It appears that IS-affiliated militant groups are gaining momentum in the region and across Russia. As members of the North Caucasus insurgency are venturing outside of the region, Russia might be witnessing the first step of a potential spillover of insurgent violence outside of the North Caucasus.

However, the North Caucasus insurgency is not yet involved in any major offensive or organized guerrilla warfare. At this stage, the insurgency still seeks to rebuild its recruitment network, gain local support, and extract resources from local businesses. The lack of military expertise and seasoned combatants limit its ability to openly challenge government forces. Yet, IS' deteriorating situation in Syria/Iraq (and the concomitant return of foreign fighters) might represent an opportunity for the insurgency to enhance its guerrilla activities. As IS controlled-territory shrinks in Iraq and Syria under military pressure from multiple fronts, the contingent of Russian-speaking IS militants represents a near-term threat for the Russian Federation.

6 The United States designated *Wilayat Qawqaz* as terrorist organization in September 2015.

In 2015, Russian President Vladimir Putin noted that as many as 4,000 Russian citizens are currently fighting in Syria/Iraq, plus a further 5,000 individuals from Post-Soviet countries. Dagestani authorities estimated that 1,200 Dagestanis are fighting with IS. That means there is a genuine threat posed by potential returnees from the Syrian and the Iraqi conflicts (Ratelle 2016). Returnees with combat experience offer veteran leadership, battlefield skills, and could further radicalize the insurgency. Unlike traditional foreign fighters, they also possess knowledge of local networks, cultural mores, and regional languages. Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev also emphasized the risk of returnees importing new repertoires of violence, such as suicide bombings and major terrorist attacks against civilian population centers. The recent terrorist attacks at the Istanbul airport in July 2016 and an Istanbul night club in January 2017 also underline the dangers associated with Russian-speaking militants. In a recent interview, Abdul Hakim Shishani, a field commander in Syria, voiced his will to return to the North Caucasus to fight against the Russian forces.

At the same time, the literature on foreign fighters has demonstrated that not all of these combatants are willing to return to their homeland following the end of a foreign conflict (Hegghammer 2013; Byman 2015). According to Daniel Byman (2015), one of the main factors prompting the potential return of militants is the existing sectarian or religious tensions in a country as well as the size of the contingent of foreign fighters. Russia is particularly vulnerable on account of existing religious tensions based on its repressive approach against non-traditional Islam and the large contingent of foreign volunteers in Syria and Iraq. Although the North Caucasus and Moscow represent ideal sites for returnees to bring jihad back home, other regions in the Russian Federation are also at risk.

The Next Five Years: the Spillover of Radical Islamist Networks Outside of the North Caucasus

The coming years will be crucial in order to assess the development and the expansion of radical Islamist net-

works in Russia. If Moscow persists in labelling all forms of non-traditional Islam as potential vectors of extremism, it runs the risk of destabilizing other Muslim minorities in the Russian Federation (Tatarstan, Urals, Far North or the Central Asian diaspora in Moscow) as it did in the North Caucasus in the mid-2000s. Although the North Caucasus insurgency was largely destroyed by Russian authorities over the last three years, it has nonetheless demonstrated a high level of resilience throughout the past 15 years—even in the face of likely annihilation in the fight against Russian and pro-Chechen forces in Chechnya. The insurgency was able to overcome the death of many of its most influential military leaders in 2005 and 2006—including Aslan Mashkadov, Shamil Basayev, and Abdul-Halim Sadulaev—as well as periodic shortages of financial resources. Despite these challenges, the insurgency expanded throughout the North Caucasus (Dagestan, Ingushetia, and Kabardino-Balkaria) in less than three years to its height in 2010–2011 (Campana and Ratelle 2014).

IK's expansion fed on growing societal discontent with Moscow's methods fighting religious extremism in the North Caucasus, which arguably radicalized more people than it was able to deter or destroy. IK capitalized on those socio-political grievances in order to increase recruitment and cultivate support networks throughout the North Caucasus republics (Campana and Ratelle 2014; Ratelle and Souleimanov 2015). These grievances were never really addressed and, to the contrary, may have expanded to the Urals and Volga regions where Moscow implemented a similarly repressive approach towards Salafism or other forms of Islam. With the indiscriminate repression against non-traditional Islam, Moscow provides the underground Islamic insurgency with recruitment potential, feeds their propaganda and facilitates IS penetration on Russian soil. Moscow's current counter-terrorist approach of indiscriminate repression appears to be unprepared to deal with the multi-faceted threat associated with radical Islam. If its strategies do not change in the coming years, the risk factors of a potential upsurge and the diffusion of insurgent violence across the Russian Federation are doomed to increase rapidly.

About the Author

Jean-François Ratelle is an assistant professor at Graduate School of Public and International Affairs at the University of Ottawa. He conducted eight months of field research in Dagestan and Chechnya in order to study patterns of rebellion and radicalisation in the region and completed his Ph.D in political science at the University of Ottawa (2013). His most recent publications have appeared in *Critical Studies on Security*, *Caucasus Survey*, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, and *Terrorism and Political Violence*

See overleaf for References

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Trends in foreign fighter recruitment and Islamist extremism in Adjara, Georgia

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Abstract

This article provides an empirical account of the growth of non-“Chechen” Islamist extremism in Georgia, focusing primarily on ethnic Georgian Muslim populations in southwestern Georgia. While ethnic “Chechen” (Kist) foreign fighters from Georgia appear to comprise the majority of Georgian militant exports to the wars in Syria and Iraq—and certainly have gained the most international media attention—there is evidence of increased numbers of Muslim Georgian Islamist militant recruitment and outflow. This article examines potential causes for Adjara radicalization as well as its potential growth trajectory, and analyzes possible impacts on domestic and regional affairs.

Introduction

Georgia-born foreign fighter participation in the conflicts in Syria and Iraq has attracted outsized attention in the international media, largely due to the exploits of the famed Omar al Shishani (Tarkhan Batirashvili), who won international notoriety for propelling the so-called Islamic State (IS) to a string of victories in 2014 and 2015 as the group’s top military commander. Aside from Batirashvili, at least four other Syrian Islamist rebel commanders (and possibly five) hailed from Georgia. While Georgians likely have made up no more than 100–200 foreign fighters over the course of the Syria

conflict—making it a much smaller contributor than its neighbors Turkey, Russia, and even Azerbaijan—Georgian *emirs* were certainly overrepresented in positions of rebel command.

The prominence of Georgian *emirs* in Syria was largely a function of two interrelated factors. First, initial foreign fighter outflows to the Syria theatre from Georgia were primarily comprised of preexisting Islamist insurgent networks. In Georgia, “first wave” Syria-bound militant Islamist insurgents were culled almost entirely at first from groups that had supported or participated in the North Caucasus insurgencies in Russia.