

Exporting Jihad: Foreign Fighters from the North Caucasus and Central Asia and the Syrian Civil War

23 September 2015

The views expressed in this document are the sole responsibility of the speaker(s) and participants, and do not necessarily reflect the view of Chatham House, its staff, associates or Council. Chatham House is independent and owes no allegiance to any government or to any political body. It does not take institutional positions on policy issues. This document is issued on the understanding that if any extract is used, the author(s)/speaker(s) and Chatham House should be credited, preferably with the date of the publication or details of the event. Where this document refers to or reports statements made by speakers at an event, every effort has been made to provide a fair representation of their views and opinions. The published text of speeches and presentations may differ from delivery.

On 23 September 2015 Chatham House's Russia and Eurasia Programme joined with the University of Birmingham to host a roundtable discussing fighters from the North Caucasus and Central Asia and the Syrian civil war. The first session addressed the impact of fighters from the former Soviet Union region on the war in Syria, logistical issues, and Russian views of the Syrian conflict. The second session concentrated on the insurgency in the North Caucasus, including its links to the global jihad and the implications of returnees from Syria. The meeting was held under the Chatham House Rule,¹ and the views expressed are those of the participants. The following summary is intended to serve as an aide-memoire to those who took part, and to provide a general summary of discussions for those who did not.

Session 1 | Fighters from the North Caucasus and Central Asia in Syria

Fighters from the North Caucasus

The first speaker focused on fighters from the North Caucasus. The conflict in Syria has drawn on a number of groups from the North Caucasus, many of whom have complex relationships with one other. The speaker discussed the evolution and disintegration of one of these groups, Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar (JMA). Despite initial battlefield successes, support for the group declined and it recently joined Al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate the Al-Nusra Front after absorbing large numbers of Syrian and other Arabic-speaking fighters and then expelling the majority of North Caucasian fighters loyal to the Caucasus Emirate. Prominent Chechen commanders included Umar al-Shishani (who later defected to ISIS) and Salakhuddin al-Shishani (who leads the Caucasus Emirate in Syria). Loyalty along ethnic and clan lines is important for many North Caucasian fighters in Syria; many of them do not want to join al-Nusra as they consider it too ideologically strict. It was suggested that radicals from the North Caucasus may have played an inferior role in JMA due to their lesser fluency in Arabic, which is considered vital to full religious understanding. This is exemplified by their deference to ideologists from beyond the Caucasus region for Sharia verdicts.

Fighters from Tajikistan

The second speaker described the profile of fighters from Tajikistan. The number of Tajik fighters in Syria is currently estimated to be around 500, and around 100 are believed to have died there, although reliable information is difficult to find. The majority of Tajik fighters have been recruited in Russia. Most are in their 20s and 30s, and a few are in their 40s, and some have brought their families to Syria. It is impossible to come up with a typical profile; the Tajik fighters come from different segments of society and have varying levels of education. There are fighters from both urban and rural areas, although, interestingly, the Rasht valley is underrepresented. They seem to maintain close links to some of the other Russian-speaking fighters in ISIS.

The regime in Dushanbe seems to regard the Tajik ISIS fighters as a serious threat to state security, but so far they have shown limited interest in returning. So far there have been two foiled attacks by people claiming to be ISIS supporters, but it is unclear if they had been to Syria. Radical groups enjoy limited support in Central Asia, but the Tajik regime's reaction to the perceived threat has been rather excessive: Tajikistan is the only country where under-18s are not allowed to pray in mosques, and where citizens need to request official permission to study religion abroad.

¹ When a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed.

Recruitment

There are push and pull factors in the ISIS recruitment drive. Their media campaigns do pick up on the Central Asian migrants' negative experiences in Russia, for example, but most of the messaging is positive, focusing on ISIS efforts to build a caliphate and the new life it offers to those who join the struggle. ISIS has shown savviness in using social media and crowdsourcing platforms. The North Caucasus appears to be a more fertile ground for recruitment than Central Asia, perhaps due to the longer history of violence there. Local grievances are the main reasons behind many people's decision to join ISIS. In light of the emphasis on Russia as the primary enemy of the Caucasus Emirate and the insurgency that predated it, it is likely that open clashes in Syria involving Russian troops would aid recruitment, both to IS and to domestic groupings.

Russian policies

It was noted that the Kremlin is increasing its military presence in Syria, but it is not clear if there are plans to deploy forces on a larger scale. Russia is not fighting ISIS, as ISIS is not the main threat for the regime of Bashar al-Assad – most of the Damascus government's attacks have been aimed at the other rebel groups. The game is not over yet for Assad, as the rebels will have a difficult time holding on to Latakia.

The perceived jihadist threat to Russia is a major factor in the Kremlin's policy-making. Estimates vary, but it is clear that the number of Russian fighters in Syria is on the rise; in 2012 there were believed to be some 200 people on the ground, and current estimates are around 2,500. Not all of those have come to fight, some are filling the ISIS administrative structures.

Many ethnic Slavs have converted and joined the struggle, which creates a challenge for the official structures in Russia. The case Varvara Kraulova, a student who attempted to cross into Syria to join ISIS in the summer of 2015, was widely publicized, but there have been many others. For now, the Russian security services mostly appear to be looking the other way when North Caucasian fighters travel to Syria, possibly because these potential troublemakers are at much greater risk in the Middle East than at home; a few prominent preachers from the North Caucasus have recently turned up in Iraq.

Officials appear to believe that the current situation is the lull before the storm. If the fighters return to the North Caucasus, they will enjoy ideological appeal on the ground. However, not all Russian fighters want to bring jihad to their home territory, for some ISIS represents a chance to begin a new life. ISIS offers them a good package – e.g. accommodation and social support. Still, the threat should not be underestimated; there are concerns in the Russian state apparatus that having to deal at the same time with both the Ukraine crisis and the home-grown jihadi threat may lead to an overstretch.

Session 2 | The Insurgency in the North Caucasus

The ideological evolution of the Caucasus Emirate

The ideology espoused by the successive leaders of the North Caucasus insurgency can be divided into four phases. From mid-2006 until late 2007, it could be described as irredentist jihadism, with the goal being to liberate Muslim land from non-Muslim rule. To this end, a clear hierarchy of enemies may be identified, with Russia as the main occupying foe and the local authorities as collaborators. Given the regional focus, the West occupied a peripheral position, being portrayed not as a target or enemy, but as a source of disappointment.

Following the proclamation of a Caucasus Emirate, the religious element came to the fore, with Russia and the local authorities presented as infidels and apostates respectively. A more internationalist dimension also entered the discourse, whereby the North Caucasus began to be framed as an integral part of the global Muslim community. None the less, the focus remained on the near enemy – unlike Al-Qaeda, which declared the West a target.

From late 2010, a greater focus began to be placed on international events. The activities of the Caucasus Emirate were framed as part of the ‘global jihad’, yet concerns remained among the leadership as to the negative impact this could have on the domestic struggle. Dokka Umarov in particular was not the most radical voice within the insurgency, and was thus a late convert to anti-Western rhetoric. The most internationally minded attack to date took place on Domodedovo airport, yet Russia remained the primary victim. This increased blurring of enemy groups may be termed ‘partial hybridization’.

The fourth phase, which followed the death of Umarov in late 2013, has regarded as further hybridization. Under the leadership of Aliaskhab Kebekov, the Caucasus Emirate moved rhetorically closer to Al-Qaeda. Yet priority continues to be given to the domestic fight, and the West has not become a target. It is unclear whether the domestic and international agendas will become fully integrated, thereby completing the process of hybridization. Given that the most radical fighters have defected to ISIS, potential remains for this course to be halted or even reversed.

The decline of the Caucasus Emirate

In recent years there has been a drop in insurgent capabilities in all republics. In many cases, changes in strategy correlate with the death of leaders and ensuing generational change, especially the end of the influential network controlled by Shamil Basayev. Re-establishing an insurgency in the region will be a major challenge. Returnees from Syria may find it difficult to integrate into local ethnic networks and recruit and train a new generation of insurgents, given the regional importance of these divides. Unlike Syria, the North Caucasus federal republics are not failed states and have no safe havens. Many of the local jihadist networks that were in place when fighters left will need to be either restructured or rebuilt from scratch in order to reinvigorate the latent insurgency. In addition, while it is possible that returnees from Syria may engage in ‘lone wolf’ acts of terrorism, such tactics have not been employed in the region for the last 15 years.

The FSB’s success in infiltrating radical groupings has seen insurgent groups reduced to 2006 levels and left unable to wage guerrilla warfare. In this respect, the current situation in the North Caucasus may be considered as ‘stable instability’ for Russia. In the case of Chechnya, which was for many years the focal point of the insurgency, the Kadyrov regime has yielded a marked reduction in violence. Although the model is not exportable, Kadyrov is viewed as the lesser evil. His personal relationship with Putin means that he is unlikely to be challenged in Moscow, despite disagreements between the FSB and decision-makers. Furthermore, much of the local population is reliant on the stabilization provided by Kadyrov, and will therefore likely support his continued presence.

With the Caucasus Emirate undoubtedly in decline, some insurgent leaders have pledged their allegiance to ISIS. However, it was remarked that those making such pledges do not constitute important actors within the Caucasus Emirate. Although they may hope an association with ISIS will result in funding and training benefits, in fact it could offer nothing more than a platform. ISIS does not have the regional presence to provide the supplies, logistics and arms, and is not currently interested in gaining a foothold in the North Caucasus, instead viewing the region simply as a source of manpower and a useful way of promoting their geopolitical agendas.

As such, the weakened Caucasus Emirate has had to look for support from other groups at home. Such support in the North Caucasus has not been forthcoming, however. Sufi movements have for the first time sided with Russian authorities to oppose the Caucasus Emirate and other Salafi groups that they fear may return emboldened from the conflict in Syria. One exception is Dagestan, where a structure has been established which is able to transcend leadership change via the integration of younger people.

The origins of radicalism in the North Caucasus

The Caucasus Emirate is not a purely Chechen enterprise, with Salafization originating outside the republic. Indeed, despite the de-escalation of the situation in Chechnya, network cells continue to operate in other North Caucasus republics. The situation in Dagestan is of particular concern, with the continuing clampdown on Salafi mosques by the regional authorities offering a potential source of radicalization. Not all Salafis want to export their beliefs. It is possible to delineate three distinct groupings within Salafism: jihadists, reformists and traditionalists. While religion itself is not the problem for Russia, the less nuanced approach of the authorities in dealing with religious sects can establish the roots of insurgency. Retaliation to such suppression is thus considered to be a significant motive for joining radical groups.

Whether arising from religious discrimination or the desire to avenge a relative, local grievances remain the primary cause of radicalization, with jihad taking on an ethno-religious dimension. This extends beyond Salafism, with many Sufis also involved in violence. Despite a tendency in the literature to focus on Takfirism, it is not ingrained among the militants.

The causes of radicalization in the North Caucasus mean the situation is unlikely to change until Russia itself changes and Moscow is able to offer an alternative vision to the people in the region. If religious repression continues, so will the insurgency. It may prove difficult for the Kremlin to sustain current levels of investment in the region given the government's economic problems, potentially creating further discontent. Chinese investment may fill this void, with Kabardino-Balkaria actively lobbying for involvement in the One Belt, One Road initiative. It is also necessary to take a more nuanced approach in both research and practice: radicalization is too often presented as a linear process, and the North Caucasus not considered from a long-term perspective.