The Rise, Fall and Future of Jihad in the North Caucasus

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Since the beginning of armed conflict in Syria and Iraq, thousands of militants from the Caucasus region have participated in the war. However, dislodging Daesh and a collapse of the insurgency in the North Caucasus have substantially diminished the capacities of North Caucasian jihadi groups. Nevertheless, militancy in the region has potential.

In recent years the intensity of armed conflict in North Caucasus has sharply declined. According to analysis released by the Conflict Analysis and Prevention Center in 2018, 110 individuals died or were injured as the result of the insurgency in the North Caucasus, the lowest number of casualties in the last eight years. Simultaneously, the advance of the Iraqi and Syrian armies, as well as Kurdish forces in Syria and Iraq, resulted in the retaking of jihadi-held territories, where the presence of North Caucasian foreign fighters was high. The decrease in activity of North Caucasian jihadis raises the question of the future of insurgency in Russia’s Southern regions.

Islamist militancy in the North Caucasus traces back to the Russo-Chechen war. Since the mid-1990s, the armed resistance in Chechnya has gradually shifted from being a nationalist-secessionist movement towards Islamic jihad. The presence of Arab foreign fighters and ideologists who previously fought in the Soviet–Afghanistan war, such as Khattab, Abu Walid or Abu Khafs had a crucial impact on the ideological and operational parameters of the conflict. For instance, female suicide bombing, a tactic previously unknown in Chechnya, was introduced in this period. In January 2000 the leadership of the breakaway republic also established diplomatic relations with the Taliban in Afghanistan.

In 2007, the leader of the Chechen resistance, the president of the self-proclaimed Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, abolished the secular republic and established the sharia-based ‘Caucasus Emirate’ (Imarat Kavkaz, or IK). The new virtual state was no longer constrained by Chechnya’s borders, and spread throughout the North Caucasian republics. Between 2009 and 2010 IK reached the peak of its activities, which includes numerous ambushes and hit-and-run attacks against Russian armed forces and local law enforcement, and the group committed several terrorist attacks in Russia’s major cities.

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Simultaneously, the beginning of the conflict in Syria in 2011 led to the first large-scale mobilisation of militants from the North Caucasus region. According to Russian officials, at least 2,500 fighters from the North Caucasus joined various jihadi groups in Syria and Iraq. This number does not include ethnic North Caucasian recruits residing in other regions of Russia or abroad. North Caucasian insurgents have been widely represented within Daesh (also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, ISIS), as well as other jihadi groups such as Jabhat Al-Nusra, Jaish Al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar (previously the branch of IK in Syria), and Akhrar Al-Sham. In most cases, North Caucasian foreign fighters have been fighting in Russian-speaking units along with other transnational militants from the Volga region, Central Asia, Crimea and the South Caucasus. Several North Caucasian field commanders were leading large transnational jihadi groups. One of them, Georgian-born Chechen Omar Al-Shishani even became one of the leading non-Iraqi Daesh field commanders. North Caucasians had appeared within the vanguard of global jihad for the first time.

The beginning of the conflict in Syria was also accompanied by the gradual downturn of militancy in the North Caucasus. For instance, in 2011 the number of people killed by insurgent violence was 1375, whereas in 2017 the number had decreased by 87%. Owing to the sharp decline, jihadis operating in the North Caucasus failed to launch terror attacks during two major sporting events in Russia: the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympic Games and the 2018 FIFA World Cup.
The Current State of North Caucasian Militants

Since Daesh lost control over the vast majority of its territories in Syria and Iraq, the activities of North Caucasian foreign fighters have decreased. As Daesh has noted, dozens of North Caucasian militants have died in the conflict. Occasional death reports suggest that a small group of North Caucasian militants remain in Daesh-controlled enclaves of Eastern Syria and are continuing to conduct asymmetrical warfare.

Aside from militants who are sworn to Daesh, there are numerous other active Russian-speaking jihadi groups in Syria. First is Ajnad Al-Kavkaz, reportedly led by Abdul Hakim Al-Shishani, predominantly comprised of ethnic Chechens. The second group is Jund Al-Sham, commanded by veteran of the Russo-Chechen wars Muslim Al-Shishani. Both groups are operating in a jihadi-controlled region of Syria’s Idlib province. Muslim Al-Shishani frequently releases video footage and written communiqués, and has even been in contact with Turkish media. In 2018, he was reported to have been involved in Turkey’s offensive operation Olive Branch against Kurdish armed groups in Syria’s Afrin district.

Some of the foreign fighters and their spouses have been able to escape the theatre of war and settle in third countries, but many North Caucasian women and children have been captured by Iraqi Army or Kurdish forces. According to Russian human rights activists, thousands of female Russian
citizens and their children have been detained in Syria and Iraq, at least 19 of whom, have been sentenced to life imprisonment.

The attitude towards these returnees in Russia has been mixed. Since 2016, Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov has operated a large-scale repatriation programme for Chechen women and children stuck in Syria and Iraq. Instead of being involved in hostilities directly, female foreign fighters from the Caucasus region typically held support roles, such as cooking, cleaning or nursing. In stark contrast to Kadyrov’s tolerance towards female returnees, in neighbouring Dagestan, several local women have been apprehended upon returning from the conflict zone. However, local authorities do not have a long-term strategy for dealing with returnees. Repatriated widows and children typically do not take part in rehabilitation or deradicalisation programmes.

Concerning the insurgency in the Caucasus region, the death of influential field commanders has led to the demise of rebels’ clandestine networks in the region. Although several armed attacks took place in Dagestan and Chechnya in recent years, they have been committed either by disconnected ‘lone wolves’ or by autonomous armed cells. Russia’s tightened counter-terrorism legislation, which criminalises participation in or affiliation with jihadi groups, is a major obstacle for potential returnees.

Explaining the Decline of North Caucasian Insurgency

Several key developments have contributed to the demise of North Caucasian jihadi operations in the Caucasus region and beyond. First, Russia’s proactive counterterrorism measures have critically damaged the infrastructure and capacities of North Caucasian armed groups. Following the establishment of full control over Chechnya in the early 2000s, remaining rebel units have been relocated from major settlements into the uninhabited mountainous regions covered by dense forests. Russian forces have employed proactive counterinsurgency measures, including permanent arrests of rebels and their potential supporters, special operations, and even extrajudicial methods. Moscow reinforced its counterterrorism efforts on the eve of the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics. Enormous pressure from the Russian state and harsh living conditions have made survival for the rebels extremely challenging.

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Second, the Syrian conflict led to the export of human resources from North Caucasian jihadi groups to the Middle East. Functional urban infrastructure in the territories held by Daesh posed an attractive alternative to life in the forested mountains for North Caucasian foreign fighters. Such favourable conditions, often referred to as ‘five-star jihad’ among the insurgents, also allowed foreign fighters to bring their spouses and children. In fact, Russian security services facilitated the migration of jihadi activists to Iraq and Syria. For instance, in May 2015 the prominent Dagestani Salafi preacher Nadir Abu Khalid was allowed to leave Russia and join Daesh in Syria despite being under house arrest at the time of his departure.

Third, the schism within the North Caucasian insurgency played its own part in its collapse. Between 2014 and 2015 the vast majority of senior rebel leaders in the North Caucasus pledged allegiance to Daesh. The leader of the Dagestani province of IK, Abu Muhammad Kadorsky, was appointed emir of Daesh-affiliated Caucasus province. However, prominent North Caucasian militant leaders such as Ali Abu Mukhamad and Abu Usman Gimrinsky refused to pledge allegiance to Daesh and remained loyal to IK and its distinct ideology. In addition, influential Caucasian militant leaders in Syria such as Muslim Al-Shishani, Abdul Hakim Al-Shishani and Salahuddin Al-Shishani also refrained from joining Daesh. All these events led to the confusion and demotivation among young supporters of jihad across the North Caucasus.

Fourth, the dismantling of IK has resulted from the death of North Caucasian rebels with relevant experience. The death or detention of jihadi leaders and ideologists such as Doku Umarov, Said Buryatsky, Ali Taziyev, Sypyan Abdulayev, Anзор Astemirov (Seifullah) Aliskhab Kebekov; and others, irreparably damaged IK’s structure, while active Chechen rebel leaders such as Makhran Sadiev, Tarkhan Gaziyev and Aslanbek Vadalov have fled the North Caucasus. Furthermore, the vast majority of North Caucasian field commanders in Syria have also been killed, and young and inexperienced militants have failed to replace their predecessors.

Fifth, the North Caucasian militant leadership failed to reach out to the wider population of the region. More precisely, since 2007 North Caucasian rebel groups have heavily relied on hard-line Salafi and jihadi ideology, alienating potential allies such as nationalists and followers of Sufi Islam, who share grievances against Moscow.

Finally, changed attitudes towards North Caucasian militants in the West have deprived them of any potential moral support from audiences in Europe or the US. During the first and the early second Chechen wars, many western politicians expressed their sympathy towards Chechen separatist leaders. But now, numerous terrorist attacks in Russia; the Boston Marathon bombings of April 2013 perpetrated by Chechen brothers Tamerlan and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev; a suicide bombing in Istanbul in January 2016 committed by Dagestani Diana Ramazanova; and a skirmish between Georgian special forces and Daesh-linked Chechen armed groups in the capital Tbilisi, led by Akhmed Chatayev; have all endorsed the perception that North Caucasian militants are an integral part of global jihad, and are not seen as freedom fighters.
The Future of Jihad in the North Caucasus

Despite the disorganisation of militancy in the North Caucasus, the collapse of Daesh raises the question of the future of Russian-speaking foreign fighters. Those who remained in Daesh-controlled enclaves in Syria will most likely fight to the death. Owing to strict counterterrorism legislation in Russia, the increased presence of Russia’s security and military apparatus in the North Caucasus, and the collapse of local rebel groups’ logistics, those who survived and escaped from Syria are unlikely to return home in the foreseeable future, and will most likely settle in third countries. The ease of foreign fighters from the Soviet–Afghanistan conflict suggests that non-indigenous jihadi militants are fully capable of joining armed groups in other regions. Accordingly, some North Caucasian foreign fighters may be relocated by Daesh to countries with poor governance and an existing Islamist insurgency, such as Afghanistan, the tribal zone of Pakistan, Somalia, Libya or Yemen.

Although veterans of the Syrian war may not be returning home, domestic realities there that have facilitated radicalisation and large-scale jihadi mobilisation are still in place. According to official statistics, Chechnya, Ingushetia, Dagestan, North Ossetia, Kabardino-Balkaria and Karachai-Cherkessia are among the most economically backward Russian federal subjects. Heavy dependency on budget transfers from Moscow, large-scale corruption, and unemployment serve as indicators of underdevelopment in the North Caucasus. Combined with these economic problems, Chechnya, Ingushetia and Dagestan are among the Russian federal subjects with the highest birth rates in the country, which increases the share of the young and unemployed population.

Another facilitator of radicalisation could be the identity crisis among North Caucasian ethnic groups. In recent decades, the region has been gradually alienated from social and political processes in Russia. North Caucasians are not represented in senior Russian government posts, or among the leadership of the Russian opposition. In addition, since 1989 at least 270,000 ethnic Russians have left the North Caucasian republics, and this trend has continued. Hence, Moscow’s control over the region is highly dependent on the presence of its security apparatus and the loyalty of local political elites. Meanwhile, anti-Caucasian sentiment has grown in the rest of Russia. For instance, a popular slogan of the growing far-right movements in Russia reads: ‘Stop Feeding the Caucasus’. Furthermore, highly discredited due to its cooperation with Russian security services, the Muslim Spiritual Directorates of the North Caucasian republics, the branches of a centralised religious organisation of Russian Muslims, is incapable of providing young people with an alternative to Salafi ideology.

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Finally, grievances towards Moscow have not gone away. For instance, according to a new law adopted in 2018, Russia’s minority languages, including those of the North Caucasus, are no longer compulsory modules in first and secondary schools, even for native inhabitants for the region. Furthermore, Moscow has reinforced a policy of replacing ethnically North Caucasian high and middle-ranking officials with non-indigenous cadres appointed from the federal centre. For instance, the current head of Dagestan is Vladimir Vasilyev, who prior to his appointment served as the deputy speaker of the Russian Duma. In such circumstances, the willingness of oppressed local clans to oppose the status quo and encroachment by Moscow could facilitate the revitalisation of an Islamist insurgency.

Aside from the North Caucasus, Russia’s large cities have the potential to accommodate clandestine jihadi networks. North Caucasian migrants, along with large Central Asian diasporas in Moscow and Russia’s other major cities could become the main targets for potential jihadi recruiters. According to Moscow-based scholar Akhmed Yarlykapov, the younger generation among North Caucasian diasporas in Russia’s oil-rich northern regions have been substantially affected by jihadi radicalisation, spurring their migration to Syria.

Conclusions

The problem of foreign fighters from the North Caucasus is a highly complex issue at both the domestic and international level. The contribution of Russian-speaking militants to the conflict in Syria and Iraq was substantial. For the first time in history, North Caucasian insurgents were fighting alongside the leadership of the global jihad. The enduring broad network of North Caucasian, Central Asian and other Russian-speaking jihadis creates security concerns not only for Russia, but across the Caucasus and Central Asia. Despite the recent decline of jihadi activism, North Caucasian militants have the potential to resume their activities in their homeland or abroad. The combination of social processes in Russia and its neighbourhood could make room for a new wave of jihadi violence.

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