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## Research Article

# Jihad in Russian

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**Abstract:** While Russia's military involvement in the war in Syria has received great attention, less focus has been directed at the foreign fighters from Russia and other post-Soviet states who have joined the Islamic State and other Jihadist groups. The emergence of these Jihadists has been a gradual process, which began in the 1990s, and it has now led to a situation where an estimated 7,000 Russians and 3,000 Central Asians are fighting in Syria. These figures present a challenge for the various states fighting the Jihadist groups, but they pose a much greater problem for the Russian and other national authorities, who will have to handle the fighters, when they return home.

**Keywords:** Russia, Caucasus, Central Asia, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Uighurs.

## Introduction

On 28 June 2016, the main international airport of Istanbul was hit by a terrorist attack when three men carried out a suicide mission in which, after an initial assault with automatic weapons, they detonated their suicide vests. The Turkish authorities soon identified the three men as citizens of Russia (the Republic of Dagestan), Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, respectively, and they alleged that the attackers had wanted to demonstrate their support for Islamic State (IS).<sup>1</sup> The terrorist attack in Istanbul is symbolic of a worrying development by which Islamist environments in the former Soviet Union seem to be producing still more supporters of IS and al-Qaeda (AQ), for example, who are willing to use terror as a means of furthering their cause.

<sup>1</sup> "Istanbul airport bombers were Russian, Uzbek, Kyrgyz: Turkish official," *Reuters*, June 30, 2016.

## The historical background

Pre-revolutionary Russia and the Soviet Union were both empires. Through a long series of military victories, Tsarist Russia in particular succeeded in subjugating a large number of minorities in the neighboring regions, thereby gradually expanding the empire. The specific feature of this expansion was the fact that colonies were directly attached to the empire and there was therefore a relatively free exchange of people between the center and the periphery.

Islam became part of the Russian empire by the conquest of Kazan (1552) and Astrakhan (1556). In the following 350 years, the country continued along a path of expansion which would eventually give it control over the current states of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan as well as the Northern Caucasus, today the home of Russian republics such as Chechnya, Dagestan and Ingushetia. The common feature of these areas is the fact that they have a Sunni Muslim majority population and that Islam has played—and continues to play—a larger role in the public life here than in the other parts of the former empire.

Pre-revolutionary Russia largely left its Muslim population groups to themselves and the authorities had modest ambitions only to reform these minority cultures. This changed under Soviet rule, which attempted to create a new and better (wo)man (the “Homo Sovieticus”) through a policy of aggressive atheism and “Sovietification” (in reality “Russofication”). This (wo)man was to be enlightened and therefore needed to lose religion in a total break with the pre-revolutionary ways of life.

This policy had a certain effect and religious practices therefore largely disappeared from public life as the knowledge of religious affairs in society in general also declined. This was also the case in the predominantly Muslim areas. Here, a combination of unchallenged atheist information campaigns (for instance in teaching and in popular culture) and oppression (for instance the demolition of mosques, the closure of *madradas* and the firing of staff members who had engaged in unwanted religious activities) brought general knowledge of Islam to a very low level. In certain areas, some knowledge was maintained through illegal underground activities, however, and in the Northern Caucasus in particular, the extensive secret *Sufi* networks helped preserve old knowledge and traditions.<sup>2</sup>

The second half of the 1980’s witnessed a political thaw in the Soviet Union, and this development also left more room for religion. Soviet citizens eagerly turned to religion, which became an identity marker for many, and perhaps no more so than for the non-Orthodox minority groups in the country. This was also a noticeable trend in the Muslim areas in the new Russia as well as in the Muslim-dominated new states. Being knowledgeable of Islam and to be a practicing Muslim became a sign of status, if only to show that one was “non-Rus-

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<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Alexandre Bennigsen and Enders Wimbush, *Muslims of the Soviet Empire: A Guide* (London: C. Hurst, 1986).

sian” in one’s cultural outlook. However, after decades of atheism, it was not always straightforward to define what “we” believe in and what “our” traditions are, and the outside world also started to influence the Muslims of the former Soviet Union in ways that they had not experienced under the closed-off Soviet regime. All kinds of interpretations were brought to the religious market place in the hope that they would appeal to a bewildered population in search of new identities.

### **The situation in Russia: AQ versus Islamic State**

As many as 20 million people in Russia are Muslims. This figure covers Russian citizens (approximately 16 million) as well as migrant workers (approximately four million) from Central Asia in particular. They are concentrated in the Volga-Ural area, in the Northern Caucasus and of course in the larger Russian cities.<sup>3</sup> According to general estimates, some four million Muslims live in Moscow and an additional 700,000 reside in St. Petersburg.

Even though Islam has been part of Russian society for more than 450 years, there seems to have been a paradigm shift in the public attitude towards Islam in the past 20-30 years. Earlier, Islam was largely an exotic phenomenon, which ordinary citizens could experience in literature, in movies, and on trips to the Northern Caucasus, for instance. However, in many parts of the country, the religion is now part of everyday life. Mosques, both big and small, are being built, and Muslims now live alongside their co-nationals in apartment blocks, hold positions at the work place, attend the regional university and go to local schools and kindergartens.

The increased public attention to Islam is also due to a general process of Islamization, broadly defined here as the formulation of one or more religiously founded alternatives to the existing political structures and normative frameworks, *and* it is due to the fact that the country has been severely hit by “Islamic” terrorism. This rather loose category covers the entire spectrum, from terrorism carried out by non-religious separatists from Muslim-dominated areas, to terrorism carried out by radical Islamists seeking a complete overturn of contemporary society, be it locally, or in Russia as a whole, or on an even bigger scale. The defining feature is the fact that, by public understanding, these acts all originate in the same place; the country’s Muslim minority group.

Some of the more spectacular and deadly terrorist attacks from this category include the Budyonovsk hospital (1995, 121 killed), the *Nordost* theatre in Moscow (2002, 170 killed), a local Beslan school (2004, 344 killed) and the Moscow metro (2004 and 2010, 40 and 20 killed, respectively). The common feature of these attacks is the link to the Northern Caucasus, where the legacy of the two Chechen wars (1994-1996 and 1999-2009, respectively) is still being felt. This is testimony to the severity of the two wars and to the desperation felt by part of the population of Chechnya in particular and of the Northern

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<sup>3</sup> Aleksey Malashenko, *Islam dlya Rossii* (Moscow: Carnegie Center, 2007), pp. 10-14.

Caucasus in general. Political repression, public stigmatization and the challenging social conditions together represent a recipe for radicalization.

Militant Islamist ideology became dominant in Chechnya and its neighboring republics in the late 1990s, when the use of terrorism became widely accepted as part of the struggle against Russia. A characteristic of this first phase of Islamist terrorism in Russia was that it had an internal focus. Initially, it was linked to the first war in Chechnya and some of the more uncompromising groups wanted the secession of Chechnya or even wider stretches of the Northern Caucasus from Russia, for instance, with the subsequent establishment of an Islamic Emirate covering the newly seceded areas. Secular law had to be rejected, as was also attempted in the 1990s in small autonomous pockets in the Northern Caucasus, and Islamic law had to take its place.

For many, this represented the ultimate dream of a return to the more traditional societies which existed before Soviet secularism became part of the official ideology and, so it was argued, robbed the Muslims of the Northern Caucasus of their true identity. This dream could only be realized through secession from Russia, so the argument continued, but since Russia did not intend to surrender these areas, an armed struggle was needed. Shamil Basayev (killed in 2006), Zelimkhan Yanderbiyev (killed in 2004), Aslan Mashkadov (killed in 2005) and Doku Umarov (killed in 2014) are some of the names from this time.

In 2007, Umarov established "the Caucasian Emirate," previously perhaps the most active terrorist group in Russia, which initially operated under a self-declared affiliation to AQ and which also served as an umbrella organization for other smaller groups. For Umarov, the central issue was no longer the independence of Chechnya but the establishment of an Islamic emirate covering the entire Northern Caucasus. This aim gradually led him to introduce the struggle to other parts of Russia, ordering terrorist attacks against civilians throughout the country.

However, in 2014, several high-ranking members of the Emirate decided to make public their support for IS, which responded by establishing the so-called IS Caucasus Province in the following year. The transfer of loyalty by these fighters from AQ to IS seems to have been mainly ideologically motivated and it seems to rest on a greater acceptance of the self-declared role and mission of the latter organization. This development has led to a weakening of the Emirate, which is now struggling to prevent a continued departure of members from its ranks. These problems have been exacerbated by the relentless pressure from the Russian security services, which in April 2015 killed Umarov's successor, Aliaskhab Kebekov, and immediately afterwards, in August 2015, Kebekov's successor, Magomed Suleimanov.

The militant Islamists came from Chechnya as well as from the neighboring republics, and there was even an influx of foreign Jihadists, for instance from the Middle East, who wanted to support the Chechens and other Northern Caucasus peoples in their fight against the secular Russian central power. Many of these foreign terrorists arrived with extensive battle experience from the

Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, from the Tajik civil war and from various conflicts in the Middle East, and they contributed to making the situation in Russia more extreme. They would typically bring with them a very black-and-white view of religion in general and Islam in particular, an uncompromising attitude towards “the enemy,” as well as much-needed finances.

One of the more well-known figures was Ibn al-Khattab (killed in 2002), a Saudi-born Jihadist with ties to the founder of AQ, Osama bin-Laden. Al-Khattab had fought together with bin-Laden against the Soviet forces in Afghanistan in the 1980s. Accompanied by some of his most loyal fighters, he arrived in Chechnya in the mid-1990’s and then helped establish a group of foreign Jihadists in Chechnya. To many, al-Khattab became synonymous with the internationalization of the conflict in the Northern Caucasus and his profile fitted the role perfectly. He won an important ally by joining forces with the unit of Basayev, who masterminded the 1995 attack on the Budyonnovsk hospital. Al-Khattab’s knowledge and practical experience with asymmetric warfare secured him a prominent position in the Islamist terrorist environment in the Northern Caucasus, and he served to give the conflict an even more irreconcilable and violent dimension.

This phase, however, still did not see apocalyptic terrorism but rather a sort of carefully measured shock effect in an asymmetric conflict with the central power. More was gradually added to the shock effect, however, in terms of both targets (including more attacks against civilians in the main Russian population centers) and means (especially through the use since 2000 of suicide bombers and by the recruitment of more women, in particular the infamous “black widows”).

The difficult situation in the Northern Caucasus generally and in Chechnya specifically also translated into large-scale terrorism, because conditions at the time made this possible. The Russian authorities simply found it difficult to enforce their rule in the region, and larger self-controlled areas emerged in which central rule was ignored. This offered the North Caucasian rebels an opportunity to gather, to train and to use the areas as launch pads for their activities in the Northern Caucasus or elsewhere in Russia. This was illustrated in 1995, when Basayev led as many as 200 terrorists in a convoy into Stavropol Krai and on to the hospital in Budyonnovsk. The terrorists moved almost unnoticed and whenever they were stopped at control posts, they simply bribed corrupt security forces to be allowed to drive on.

When Russian President Vladimir Putin was called onto the political stage in August 1999, he made “the power of the vertical” his first political slogan. The ambition was to re-establish the authority of the central power *throughout* Russia, but his main priority was clearly to bring the disputed areas of the Northern Caucasus back under the control of Moscow. An uncompromising policy led to a rollback of the self-delegated autonomy found in many regions, and the authorities were given additional measures to enforce central power locally, regionally and nationally. In 2000, Putin appointed local strongman

Akhmad Kadyrov as the new head of the regional administration in Chechnya, and this appointment sent a strong message from Putin about his ambition to drive out the terrorists from the republic.

However, in 2004 terrorists succeeded in killing Akhmad Kadyrov in a spectacular attack carried out at the central stadium in Grozny. Putin's search for a successor to Kadyrov led him to Ramzan Kadyrov, Akhmad Kadyrov's son, and in 2007 Ramzan took over as the new Chechen president. Alu Alkhanov, then Chechen president, filled the interim until Ramzan turned 30, the minimum age required for any presidential candidate. Under Ramzan Kadyrov an iron rule, even stricter than that of his father, has been introduced in Chechnya and Islamists, violent as well as non-violent, have left the republic in great numbers to seek refuge in neighboring areas (especially in Dagestan) or even abroad.

This development is important to note, as it provides the background to the current phase in which Islamist terrorists are leaving Russia in ever greater numbers to join groups, mainly IS, elsewhere. It should be added, however, that even though the Russian authorities have succeeded in strengthening central rule, Russia is being hit by terrorist attacks on an almost weekly basis. From a Russian perspective, most attacks are relatively small, with only a few casualties, and usually too insignificant to make news in the West. Most attacks are still carried out in the Northern Caucasus, and Dagestan in particular has suffered, as much of the Chechen conflict now finds its expression there instead.

### **Syria: The new battle zone for Jihadists**

It was only in 2012 that the international media started reporting about the presence of Caucasian Jihadists in Syria. One of the first to arrive was Rustam Gelayev, the son of one of the most powerful Chechen warlords, Ruslan Gelayev (killed in 2004). News of the killing of Rustam Gelayev during a battle for Aleppo in 2012 became a major story as it indicated for the first time the magnitude of the presence of the Caucasian Jihadists in Syria.

The Syria conflict has offered Russian Islamists a sanctuary and a new cause. According to the Russian security service, FSB, as many as 2,400 Russians have fought—or are fighting—for IS or other militant Islamist groups, but Russian experts put the figure at a full 7,000.<sup>4</sup> The Caucasian Jihadists are fragmented and they not only fight for IS, but also for other groups with different ideologies and aims. Initially, the Caucasian Jihadists would form their own smaller units and would often be under the command of a more battle-hardened Jihadist with experience from the wars in Chechnya. Later, many of these smaller units were forced to choose side and to join larger groups. Overall, the Caucasian Jihadists in Syria form three distinct groups.

The first and most well-known group is composed of Jihadists who joined IS under the command of the charismatic red-bearded emir Umar al-Shishani. Al-Shishani, an ethnic Chechen with Georgian citizenship, was one of the first to

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<sup>4</sup> Anonymous Russian expert interviewed in Brussels, October 22, 2015.

arrive in the area. He established a smaller group of predominantly Caucasian Jihadists under the name *Katibat al-Muhajireen*. He soon became a household figure as he led his fighters to several successful attacks against Syrian government forces. His popularity led to an influx of people to his group, which expanded in terms of both membership and geography. He was later appointed so-called Minister of War for IS and thus became the highest-ranking Caucasian in the IS hierarchy. Al-Shishani was reported dead prematurely by both local and international media several times, but he seems to have been killed in July 2016 when IS announced news of his death. Despite the death of al-Shishani, the Caucasian Jihadists continue to play an important role for IS.

Whereas al-Shishani decided to join IS, other leading Caucasian Jihadists instead joined the then *Nusra Front* (since July 2016 known as *Jabhat Fatah al-Sham*). For example, a loyal AQ supporter, Umarov, specifically advised Caucasian Jihadists *not* to declare allegiance to IS once they arrived in Syria. One of the fighters who would seem to have taken this advice was Amir Saifullah, a well-known Chechen Jihadist with battle experience from Afghanistan and Chechnya, who decided to establish a new group in Syria under the name *Mujahidin al-Kawkaz fi as-Sham*. Saifullah was killed in 2014, but his group continues to fight, together with other smaller Caucasian and Central Asian groups, alongside *Jabhat Fatah al-Sham* against both the Syrian government forces and IS.

There are still, however, Caucasian Jihadists in Syria who have decided to join neither IS nor *Jabhat Fatah al-Sham* and who have instead forged alliances across local groups. One of the reasons for this is the fact that many Caucasian Jihadists prefer not to choose sides in the conflict between IS and *Jabhat Fatah al-Sham* and thereby to risk killing fellow Caucasian Jihadists. The most important “independent” Caucasian group is the unit of Abu Muslim al-Shishani, which is primarily composed of Caucasian, Central Asian and Turkish Jihadists, and which operates in Northern Syria.

The war in Syria has brought forward a new generation of Caucasian Jihadists with extensive training and battle experience. It does seem, however, that they are highly fragmented. The presence of (the now killed) al-Shishani was an important factor for many Caucasian Jihadists in particular as they decided to join IS. At home in the Northern Caucasus, the situation also seems favorable for IS, as several high-ranking members of the Emirate, as mentioned earlier, decided to declare their loyalty to IS. The current leader of these “break-away” Jihadists is Rustam Asildarov, who is suspected of having masterminded a number of terrorist attacks in Russia. Islamic State in the Caucasus is now believed to be behind most of the terrorist attacks carried out in the Northern Caucasus.

## Jihadism in Central Asia

As far as Post-Soviet Central Asia is concerned, the FSB estimates that as many as 4,000 Jihadists from this region have joined IS.<sup>5</sup> The figures are surrounded by a great deal of uncertainty, however. Most seem to have been recruited from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, that is, from the two states of the region which have been hit most severely by terrorist attacks and which both suffer from a combination of heavy political repression and extensive poverty.

In Uzbekistan, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) in particular has been successful in carrying out a series of spectacular attacks, some even with the use of suicide bombers. In recent years, however, the IMU has been on the defensive, as the Uzbek authorities have managed to push a large number of militant Islamists across the border into Kyrgyzstan. The active re-mining by the Uzbek authorities of the Uzbek-Kyrgyz border should be considered in this context.

The IMU previously swore allegiance to AQ and the Taliban, but in 2015 the IMU leader, Usman Ghazi, announced that the organization should instead be considered as a regional branch of IS. As it turned out, however, a majority part of the IMU did not support this transfer of loyalty and fighting broke out between Taliban supporters and fighters loyal to Ghazi. Following the fighting, which threatened to destroy the IMU, a number of IMU fighters officially broke with IS and made explicit their allegiance to the Taliban and AQ (see also the article by Sheikh in this issue).<sup>6</sup> This has clearly left the IMU much weakened.

Tajikistan suffered from a bloody civil war from 1992-1997. Islamist forces, from the moderate to the militant, joined various secular parties in a broad opposition to the then existing order. They lost the war, however, and the outcome was only a slight shift in the distribution of power among the more privileged regions of the country. As part of the 1997 peace settlement, Tajik President Emomali Rakhmon attempted to accommodate some of the more moderate Islamist forces by incorporating them into a power-sharing scheme. This agreement has become increasingly fragile, however, as the Islamist groups seek to increase their power beyond what was offered to them two decades ago. This was illustrated in September 2015, when then Deputy Defense Minister General Narzazoda Mirzo, whose position in the cabinet was reserved for the moderate Islamist opposition, led a series of terrorist attacks in the capital Dushanbe. Mirzo was later killed by security forces during an attempted escape.

Earlier in 2015, the then head of the Tajik antiterrorist forces, Colonel Gulmorod Halimov, left Tajikistan to fight for the IS in Syria. Halimov, an experienced special operations officer, has received extensive military training in the

<sup>5</sup> "Islamic State threat to Russia is real – FSB," *RT*, April 10, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Mona Kanwal Sheikh, "Islamic State enters Al-Qaeda's old hotbed: Afghanistan and Pakistan," *Connections: The Quarterly Journal* 16, no. 1 (Winter 2017): 37-49, <https://doi.org/10.11610/Connections.16.1.03>.



USA and his defection represents not only a propaganda victory for IS, but it is also an important strengthening of the military capacity of the organization. Conditions in Tajikistan make it difficult to assess the extent of the underground support for IS. The Halimov case, however, suggests that there is quite some support beneath the official surface. To this should be added that in general the Persian-speaking Tajiks also seem to have a relatively large affinity for the Taliban and, although less so, for AQ.

This brief discussion of Post-Soviet Central Asia should also include the Muslim and Turkish-speaking Uighurs. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, many Uighurs left their home in Xinjiang in Western China to seek refuge in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan in particular. These states, which have Muslim and Turkish-speaking majority populations, border on Xinjiang and have relatively liberal political regimes. It is estimated that some 500,000 Uighurs live in post-Soviet Central Asia and the Chinese authorities have put heavy pressure on the countries in the region to ensure that China does not become a safe haven for supporters of the Turkestan Islamic Party.<sup>7</sup> This party is seeking to establish an independent and Islamic Xinjiang in a possible association with the Turkish-speaking neighbors in Post-Soviet Central Asia. An unknown number of Uighurs are currently fighting in Syria and in Iraq, some for IS and some for the *Jabhat Fath al-Sham*.

## Conclusion

Nearly seven decades of state-imposed atheism caused a tremendous interest in religion in what is now the former Soviet Union. This of course is also true for the Muslim peoples of this area. The elite, however, has generally insisted upon a separation of the state from the religious sphere, with the consequence that all these states, including even relatively conservative Tajikistan, are now defined as secular. There seems to be increasing support for Islamist ideas and thus for Islam as a viable alternative to the existing order(s). Moreover, within this group of Islamists, there seems to be a small—yet growing—number of people ready to use terrorism in order to achieve their aims.

In most parts of the former Soviet Union, the authorities conduct anti-radicalization with a considerable element of oppression and force. One of the more spectacular anti-radicalization strategies has been the decision by the Tajik authorities to forcibly shave the beards of young men whose facial hair is considered a bit too “Islamist.” Thus, one of the regions of Tajikistan in 2015 alone reported to have detained and shaved an overwhelming 13,000 men, an achievement well documented through a series of “before-and-after” photographs.<sup>8</sup> In some places, however, Islamists simply “disappear” and the security

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<sup>7</sup> Flemming Splidsboel Hansen, “The Shanghai Co-Operation Organisation,” *Asian Affairs* 39, no. 2 (2008): 217-232.

<sup>8</sup> “Tajikistan Police Shave Nearly 13,000 Men in Their Battle Against Conservative Islam,” *Time*, January 20, 2016.

services of several of these states are suspected of carrying out extra-judicial executions.

For a small part of the Muslims of the former Soviet Union, IS has been an abstract ideal, which could inspire those seeking a new post-Soviet identity with a strong role for Islam. For a number of thousands, this ideal has been concrete enough for them to leave their homes to travel to fight for IS. This development is a very real and fully legitimate cause of concern for the national authorities of these states, and they must fear the possible return of these Jihadists. The continued oppression by the authorities of the Islamists in general may contribute to making this an even more violent encounter.

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