



## POLITICAL ISLAM

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# The North Caucasus Insurgency: a Potential Spillover into the Russian Federation?<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup> 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,<sup>3</sup> 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*<sup>4</sup> 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" Islam<sup>5</sup> 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).<sup>6</sup> 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

By Michael Hikari Cecire (New America, Washington, D.C.)

### 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.

By dint of its proximity and rugged geography, some former fighters and their sympathizers had decamped to Georgia. Second, and relatedly, these insurgent networks were facilitated by the existence of Georgian ethnic Vainakh (Kists) communities native to Georgia, specifically in the Pankisi Gorge. Culturally close to the Chechens and Ingush, and arguably integrated into the broader Chechen cultural space, Kist communities in Pankisi hosted Chechen refugees in the 1990s, including some fleeing fighters, and variously provided men, materiel, and support for North Caucasus insurgencies into the 2000s.

Kist participation in Syria was thus a natural outgrowth of escalating North Caucasian involvement in that conflict, as Georgian fighters joined Caucasus Emirate (IK) compatriots from the North Caucasus in the first wave, and the transnational IS project—buoyed in no small part by the exploits of the half-Kist Batirashvili—in the latter years.

However, while Kists have formed the bulk of Georgian foreign fighter cadres, non-Kist ethnic Georgian Muslims (largely from the western autonomous republic of Adjara) and ethnic Azerbaijanis from eastern Georgia have also been confirmed to be fighting in Syria. Because they appeared in notably fewer numbers than Georgian Kists, and certainly occupied lower profile compared to “Chechen” fighters, substantial evidence of their participation only appeared in the post-2014 “second wave” period, by which point IS had well overtaken IK as the predominant militant Islamist force in Syria. The appearance of non-Kist Georgian fighters in Syria is notable not necessarily for their numbers—even as a proportion of Georgian foreign fighter totals, they likely make up well less than half—but because of their extraction from larger communities with little reputation for radicalization. According to the 2014 Georgian census, while Kist communities numbered less than 6,000, there were approximately 133,000 and 182,000 Muslims in Adjara and Kvemo Kartli (the latter being where most ethnic Azerbaijanis are concentrated), respectively, forming the bulk of the country’s almost 11 percent Muslim population.

While both Adjarans<sup>1</sup> and ethnic Azerbaijanis can be categorized together as large proportions of the national Muslim population, the Adjaran case is particularly

unique given that population at least nominally belongs to the titular Georgian majority.

### Local Grievances

Adjara, a historically Muslim region in the southwest of the country, borders Turkey to the south and the Black Sea to the west. Like much of historical western Georgia, Adjara was at times a part of the Ottoman Empire. Although it was not formally integrated into what was to become the Republic of Turkey like other historical Georgian regions like Tao-Klarjeti, it was socially integrated into the Ottoman imperial body politic to a larger degree, especially through religious conversion. While formally ceded by the Republic of Turkey to the Soviet Union in the 1921 Treaty of Kars, Adjara was afforded treaty-bound autonomy to enshrine its unique Muslim character—technically enforceable by Turkey. To this day, Adjara remains legally an autonomous republic within Georgia, with its own parliament and executive government bodies.

However, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Adjara’s unique Muslim character appeared to be at risk. Between decades of Soviet-enforced state atheism and the revival of the Georgian Orthodox Church in the aftermath of Georgian independence, Adjara transformed from a traditionally Muslim-majority region into one that was majority Orthodox Christian. By the early 2000s, only an estimated 30 percent of Adjaran residents were Muslim.<sup>2</sup>

The rapid decline of the Adjaran Muslim population remains a source of controversy. According to a dominant, majoritarian (i.e. Christian) telling of events the post-Soviet Adjaran population freely converted to Christianity out of a sense of national pride, given the ancient Georgian Orthodox Church’s celebrated status as a longstanding totem of Georgian civilization. By contrast, Muslim Adjarans tend to describe conversions as being motivated—or coerced—by economic deprivation. The truth, though difficult to ascertain in full given the political and socio-economic chaos in newly independent Georgia, is likely somewhere in the middle. Regional scholar Thomas Liles convincingly argues that ordinary Adjarans’ quest for social mobility and full inclusion into the Georgian nation was a potent driver for conversion. It is likely that some element of social or economic coercion—both indirect, in the case of pro-Orthodox biases in state and public institutions (such as schools), and even more direct means—also played a role.

1 In the context of foreign fighters, “Adjarans” is being used to describe all ethnic Georgian Muslims, due to their predominant concentration in Adjara. Although most Adjarans are not Muslims, and significant concentrations of Georgian Muslims do exist elsewhere in the country—particularly in Samtskhe-Javakheti, Guria, and Tbilisi—this term is being used for simplicity’s sake.

2 Only estimates exist due to the 2002 Georgian Census not including religious affiliation in its questionnaire.

However, there is evidence that Islam is increasingly reemerging in Adjara. According to the 2014 Census, approximately 40 percent of Adjarans consider themselves Muslim—a sharp increase from the 30 percent estimated in the early 2000s. Several factors may be contributing to Islam’s revitalization in Adjara. First, the economic and political situation in Adjara has improved immensely since the early 2000s. Following both the 2003 Rose Revolution and Adjara’s own miniature revolution in 2004, which toppled the kleptocratic pseudo-separatist regime of Aslan Abashidze, Adjara became more open to both the rest of Georgia as well as the wider region, and specifically Turkey.<sup>3</sup> Second, and relatedly, nearby Turkey became far more engaged and integrated with social and economic life in Adjara. Under Abashidze, despite his personal Muslim heritage, Adjara was not well integrated into the nearby Turkish economy. It was only after his fall in 2004, and an increasingly assertive Turkey under the Islamist Justice and Development Party (elected in 2002), that Adjara found itself transformed from a Nakhchivan-like hermit statelet into a mutual gateway for Georgia and Turkey. Third, Adjara’s increasingly stable environment also facilitated an influx of Islamic charity activity and funding from Turkey and Gulf States, which conducted social outreach and contributed to the construction of mosques and madrassas.

However, Islam’s increasingly assertive profile in Adjara has elicited a strong pushback in Adjara and in the country overall. Perhaps no controversy exemplifies local Christian–Muslim tensions more clearly than the conflict over proposals to build a second mosque in Batumi, the Adjaran capital. Batumi’s existing Orta Jame Mosque has reportedly far exceeded its capacity, but efforts by both the local Muslim community and sympathetic governments abroad (and particularly Turkey) have failed to finalize an agreement for construction of a second mosque, which has inspired protests and backlash from the local Christian community.

Other recent controversies have also fueled tensions. Ahead of parliamentary elections in 2012, Georgian Dream (GD) candidate Murman Dumbadze—who would later attain the post of Vice Speaker of Parliament, and later be expelled from GD—railed against Turkish influence in the republic and called for any new mosque to be “bulldozed.” He also led anti-Muslim protests in the region after winning his seat in 2013. In 2014, Orthodox nationalist activists began protest-

ing against the planned establishment of a Madrasa in the seaside town of Kobuleti, culminating in a pig’s head being nailed to the door of the building intended for the madrasa. More recently, in March 2017, riots broke out in Batumi when dozens of locals violently protested against the perceived heavy handedness of a local police chief. According to some accounts, the new police chief of Adjara had made anti-Muslim remarks, inflaming tensions between the longstanding Georgian Muslim community and the now-dominant Orthodox Christian population.

### Recruitment Grist

While day-to-day interactions between Christian and Muslim residents in Adjara is generally described as good, the occurrence of regular high-profile incidents and the qualified position of Adjaran Muslims within the Georgian nation are a potent substrate within which extremist messaging has the potential to take root. The IS “caliphate” appears to have come to a similar conclusion; in late 2015 and early 2016, IS released its first two (and hitherto only) Georgian-language propaganda videos seemingly specifically aimed to recruit disaffected Adjarans. The videos, featuring Georgian Muslim fighters from Adjara and other western Georgia communities, highlighted local grievances and threatened to bring the caliphate to Georgia. The videos were notable in that IS had not released, at that point, any official propaganda video in the Georgian language—despite the relatively high level that Georgians (albeit from Pankisi) had played in the conflict<sup>4</sup>—and had chosen to do so aimed at Adjaran communities particularly.

While perhaps the most significant, the 2015/2016 videos were not the first or only signs of Adjaran radicalization. In late 2013, just as IS was establishing itself as a global “brand,” a Georgian-language Facebook page appeared for the “Islamic Republic of Adjara,” showing a series of graphics depicting the autonomous region as an independent, Salafist Islamic republic, and calling on Adjara’s Muslim population to engage in violent jihad towards this end. Within weeks, it had been deleted.

In 2014, Ahmad al Jurji (Tamaz Chaghalidze), a self-declared IS fighter in Syria from Adjara, posted a home-made video where he issued threats against Georgia in his capacity as an IS fighter. Between 2014 and 2015, Chaghalidze followed his initial video with a series of other web-based posts and even an interview for an Adjaran newspaper, where he launched bromides against Geor-

3 Under Abashidze, Adjara never declared itself independent or separate from Georgia, but it was largely governed separately as a virtual parallel state. Security checkpoints and passport controls regulated traffic not only in and out of the country, but with other regions of Georgia as well.

4 This is particularly noteworthy given that while Kists are correctly regarded as being part of the wider Chechen cultural space, Russian-language fluency in Pankisi—particularly among younger generations—is relatively limited. The primary second language (after Chechen) is Georgian.

gia's Christian majority, specifically over anti-Muslim bigotry, societal isolation, and coercion at the hands of the Orthodox Christian majority. In one telling online threat, Chaghalidze railed against Christians offering food and goods to deprived Adjaran Muslims in exchange for their conversion to Christianity. While the veracity of such claims is difficult to assess, they were notable for their specificity to the Adjaran Muslim context, and likely reflect some element of local Muslim popular perception. In late 2015, IS announced the formation of the "Vilayat Gurjistan" (Islamic Province of Georgia) led by Kist emir Al Bara Pankiski, which included Chaghalidze and an assortment of both Kists and Adjarans.

To date, fewer than ten Adjarans have been confirmed as combatants in Syria, though there are likely considerably more. In an interview, Chaghalidze once claimed as many as 200 Georgian speaking fighters were fighting in Syria, including many Adjarans. While this figure is almost certainly inflated, Georgian analyst Mamuka Areshidze claimed as early as 2014 that ten Adjarans were fighting in Syria, and it is possible that many Adjarans that may be fighting in Syria primarily do so with Turkish speaking battalions, as many Muslim Adjarans—particularly in the more conservative highlands—speak Turkish fluently.

### Risks and Opportunities

Signs of an Islamic reawakening in Adjara, particularly one that is more globalized, combined with ongoing ethno-religious marginalization, societal isolation, high poverty rates, and a preexisting narrative of Orthodox Christian repression make Adjara seemingly fertile ground for radicalization. Its relatively large population, interconnectedness with nearby Turkey, and demonstrated IS interest—through high production value videos and the creation of Vilayat Gurjistan (VG) specifically including known Adjaran fighters—would seem to suggest that Adjara is at serious risk of militant Salafist growth and potential conflict.

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However, extremist penetration is not necessarily a foregone conclusion—at least not one driven by IS. Since 2016, IS has seen its position in both Iraq and Syria severely degraded, and IS strongholds such as Kobane, Palmyra, and Mosul have recently fallen, while its "capital" in Raqqa appears to be on the brink of a multinational combined arms assault. With these territorial setbacks, the IS "brand" of victory, fueled by rapid battlefield successes in 2014–2015, has also been powerfully undermined, likely permanently. Despite VG's founding, there is little indication of IS ascendancy in the Caucasus, and VG itself (like other such non-Levant IS "provinces") may have been formed not from a position of strength, as has been commonly interpreted, but a reorganization into decentralized, cell-based command structures—not unlike the IK model it rapidly overtook in years past—as a means of self-preservation.

Meanwhile, in Adjara itself, the everyday reality for most Muslim residents has not been one of North Caucasus or Central Asia-style state repression, and in many respects Islam is being practiced more openly and freely in Adjara (and Georgia overall) than it ever has in the post-independence era. At the same time, material prosperity has been improved considerably for the majority of Adjarans in important respects; while jobs continue to be an issue facing the country overall, a Turkish-driven construction and tourism boom in the lowland coastal areas (and particularly in Batumi) has provided new opportunities for many Adjarans—and arguably more for those with Turkish-language fluency, who are more likely than not to be Muslims. In addition, transportation, medical care (Georgia recently instituted a popular universal health insurance program), and education infrastructure is widely perceived as steadily improving.

This is not to say that extremist militancy is not possible in Adjara, or that local Muslim community grievances are not genuine. Rather, Islamist radicalism faces genuine international and local headwinds that can be either augmented—or undermined—by Georgian central authorities and their partners.

## Radical Islam or Government Paranoia in Azerbaijan?

By Arzu Geybulla (Istanbul)

### Abstract

This article explores the presence of religious groups in Azerbaijan, their varying influence, and the role Azerbaijani state authorities play in their growth and popularity. The Azerbaijani government's uneasiness in the face of growing evidence of Islamic religiosity is rooted in perceived contradictions with state campaigns to portray Azerbaijan as modern, secular state. However, the country's stagnating economy, inflation, unemployment and inequality tell a different story. Following years of political repression, religion is one of the few generally accepted avenues for expressing divergent views and, in some cases, forms of dissent—and even radicalization. For this reason, the Azerbaijani government has periodically engaged in selective Islamic religious suppression to prevent the politicization of increasing Islamic sentiments. However, it is largely the economic, political, and social grievances that drive popular dissent in Azerbaijan, as opposed to major trends in radicalization itself.

### Introduction

While the Azerbaijani government periodically boasts of a secular, modernizing agenda, it is also in the midst of an on-going crackdown against its political opposition, which has generated international coverage and condemnation. Its image tarnished, Azerbaijani authorities have sought to use counterterrorism justifications—fighting so-called religious radicals—in an effort to make the case for their own indispensability to Western governments.

While the Azerbaijani government suppresses Muslim religious activists under the guise of counter-extremism, Azerbaijani authorities are also building up their own Islamic bona fides. In May 2017, Baku will host the 4<sup>th</sup> Islamic Solidarity Games. Two years ago, President Ilham Aliyev paid a visit to the *Kaaba*, a sacred site at the center of Islam's most revered mosque, Al-Masjid al-Haram, in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. When it comes to explaining these contrasts, Aliyev describes Azerbaijan as “unique,” saying that “we are members of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation and the Council of Europe. In 2015 we hosted the first European Games and this year we are hosting the 4<sup>th</sup> Islamic Solidarity Games.”<sup>1</sup>

Although the Azerbaijani government has sought to balance religious suppression at home with outward demonstrations of Islamic piety, this approach is only incubating Azerbaijan's security dilemma. The more pro-democracy voices are silenced and independent civil society organisations are immobilised, the easier it becomes for radical groups to strengthen their influence.

### The Tolerance Myth

It was not until after Azerbaijan gained its independence from the Soviet Union that its citizens rediscov-

ered Islam in large numbers. In an interview with *Open Democracy*, Azerbaijani political analyst Eldar Mamedov, said that it was Islam that filled the void after nationalism was discredited in the early 1990s, following the democratically elected Popular Front government's failure to rule effectively. But this reconnection with Islamic roots “did not carry connotations of extremism,” said Mamedov. Rather, it was “a purified form of Islam, free from local customs and ‘superstitions.’” The Popular Front and its leader, first independent President Abulfaz Elchibey supported a Turkish-style, and pan-Turkic, secular nationalist ideology, which failed to fill the ideological void left by the dissolution of the Soviet Union.<sup>2</sup>

Religious influences from neighboring countries may have begun to fill that void. Today, Islam in southern Azerbaijan feels closer to the brand of Shia Islam in Iran. By contrast, Salafi Islam is more popular in the north, especially among the Sunni Lezgi minority as well as among some residents in Baku, Sumqayit, and their outlying regions. In the most commonly cited statistics, a large majority of Azerbaijanis—some 85 percent—identify as Shi'a, with most of the remainder identifying as Sunni Muslim. However, Azerbaijani religion scholar Altay Goyushov puts the breakdown closer to 35 percent Sunni and 65 percent Shi'a. A Turkish version of Sunni Islam, backed by the US-based Turkish religious leader Fethullah Gulen, was increasingly prevalent across the country through mosques and a network of schools, but these relations were severed in 2013 after the alliance between the ruling Justice and Development Party and the Gulen network turned acrimonious. At the same time, there are a number of nominal Muslim adherents in Azerbaijan who do not identify with any major denomination, or may even identify as Shia

1 <<https://www.azadliq.org/a/ilham-eliyev-munhen/28319534.html>>

2 <<https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/arzu-geybulla/azerbaijan-ruling-in-bad-faith>>

out of a sense of national identity, and may not be particularly observant.

The Caucasus Muslim Board (CMB), a state-run religious body and a holdover from the officially atheist Soviet period, is the nominal spiritual authority. However, the CMB and its head, Allahshukur Pashazade, are widely perceived as extensions of the regime. Outside of the CMB, religious independence is sharply curtailed. According to a 2016 report by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), Azerbaijan's respect for religious freedoms deteriorated along with respect for democratic norms, stemming in part from enforcement of a highly restrictive 2009 religious law regulating religious activities, materials, and codifying intrusive state involvement,<sup>3</sup> among other things. The report also notes extensive state interference with religious activities, harassment of members of religious groups, and an increase in arrests, detentions and, other forms of sanctions against religious activists.<sup>4</sup> In March 2013 the government of Azerbaijan introduced a series of legislative amendments concerning religious literature, making it a criminal offence to import, publish, or distribute any kind of religious material, audio, or video except those approved by the Caucasus Muslim Board.

The Azerbaijani government's discomfort with independent religious activity was put on display during the so-called "Nardaran case" in 2015, where 18 members of the Shia-affiliated Muslim Unity Movement were arrested and charged with terrorism, illegal possession of arms, conspiracy, and inciting religious hatred. All were sentenced to lengthy jail sentences, from ten to twenty years in jail. In their statements at the court, they reported ill treatment and torture, but all allegations were ignored by the authorities. The men were arrested during a police raid at the house of Movement leader Taleh Bagirzade in the town of Nardaran, a bastion of conservative Shia Islam located on the outskirts of Baku. Bagirzade had been arrested before; in 2011, Bagirzade was arrested for protesting a headscarf ban in

schools, and released in November 2012. In 2013 Bagirzade was arrested again following a sermon delivered in Nardaran, when he criticised authorities for severe economic inequality and compared President Ilham Aliyev to Saddam Hussein.

Bagirzade was again released in 2015, but said he had no intention of backing down from his criticism of the authorities. "I am just in a bigger prison," Bagirzade said in one interview following his release, and continued to criticize the government in his sermons before he was arrested again. In the aftermath of his arrest, pro-government media were quick to describe Bagirzade and his followers as religious extremists. However, other Azerbaijani dissidents, including journalist Khadija Ismayilova, disagreed and described his arrest as unrelated to radical Islam, but rather as a result of his criticisms of the government.

While Bagirzade has attracted support from some Azerbaijani liberals, he himself is not a liberal democrat. Bagirzade has never openly opposed the Iranian system, and has publicly noted that Azerbaijan had at times been ruled by Sharia law before the 19<sup>th</sup> century. According to regional analyst Eldar Mamedov, "Bagirzade and his associates represent activist, politicized Shi'a Islamism in the mold of the late Ayatollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran."

However, Bagirzade has also found some popularity through his outspokenness, demonstrating that there is an audience for religious political activism, even if outright support for Sharia law itself is low. Most likely this is why Bagirzade and his movement have been the targets of state attention so frequently.

### A Real Threat Or an Attempt to Get Western Support?

At the same time, the state's crackdowns against religious groups in general, and the Muslim Unity Movement in particular, appear to maintain a narrative of the modernizing, secular Azerbaijani government combating Islamist extremism. Following the 2015 raid in Nardaran, Azerbaijani officials released a statement claiming the intent of the operation was "to neutralize an armed criminal group that acted under the cover of religion and was seeking to destabilize the social-political situation and organize mass unrest and acts of terrorism." If the statement is any indication, Bagirzade and his followers represented a latent threat to regime stability.

According to Mamedov, given his religious education and ongoing ties in Iran, Bagirzade's arrest could also be an attempt to demonstrate the persistence of an Iranian threat as a means of cultivating Western sympathies. More broadly, public crackdowns against anti-government Islamists could also be used to discre-

3 The law limits religious freedoms and justifies fines, police raids, detentions and imprisonment. Other provisions include compulsory state registration with complex and intrusive requirements; no appeal for registration denials; religious activities limited to a community's registered address; extensive state controls on the content, production, import, export, and dissemination of religious materials; and required state approved religious education to preach and teach religion, or lead ceremonies. Individuals in violation of this law are subject to fines which since 2010 have increased 16-fold. <[http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF\\_Tier2\\_Azerbaijan.pdf](http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF_Tier2_Azerbaijan.pdf)>

4 <[http://tbinternet.ohchr.org/\\_layouts/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolNo=CCPR/C/AZE/CO/4%20&Lang=En](http://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolNo=CCPR/C/AZE/CO/4%20&Lang=En)>

dit the secular opposition by seeking to associate them with religious extremists. Days after Bagirzade and his associates were convicted, pro-regime outlet Haqqin.az published a story claiming that members of the independent political movement ReAL (Republican Alternative) were backed by the Iranian government, having agreed to act as intermediaries between the Embassy of Iran in Baku and representatives of other opposition groups in Azerbaijan.<sup>5</sup> The prosecutor office was quick to launch an investigation, calling in members of the movement for questioning, who dismissed the claims as fabricated.

In addition, just twelve days after Bagirzade's arrest, Fuad Gahramanli, the deputy chairman of the opposition Azerbaijan Popular Front Party (AHCP), was arrested after openly criticizing the government in reaction to Bagirzade's arrest on Facebook. Facing three violations of the criminal code including calls for mass unrest and violence, Gahramanli was sentenced to 11 years in prison in January 2017.

### Hidden Agenda

While the crackdown against the Muslim Unity Movement and other political activists in Azerbaijan is a case for concern, it is possible that the authorities are diverting attention from a genuine problem with radicalization and growth in Azerbaijan's Salafi community, which has been a source of hundreds of fighters joining the so-called Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. According to Mamedov, the hundreds of Azerbaijanis fighting in Syria or Iraq were mostly first radicalized in Azerbaijan before leaving to join the war in Syria. Yet, there is little public information available on recruitment networks that he says "have obviously gained a foothold in the country".

According to a recent paper on Islamic State networks of jihadism in Azerbaijan, more than 200 Azerbaijanis have been killed in the conflicts in Syria and Iraq, and over 800 militants "have fought or are currently fighting there". However, despite these large numbers, militant Salafism has yet to emerge domestically as a widespread security threat. While this is seen in some quarters as evidence of successful government counterterrorism operations, it is more likely that this is a result of Azerbaijani state policies that encouraged out-migration of Salafi militants and noncombatants to Syria, which mirrored a policy utilized by the Russian Federation as a means of sapping its own North Caucasus insurgency.

While such an approach was likely effective in Azerbaijan to an extent, as it certainly was in the Russian North Caucasus, it is also a strategy of inherently diminishing returns. Uninterrupted militant recruitment networks operating domestically are necessary to facilitate foreign fighter flow, but these networks could have a broader radicalizing effect on the communities where they operate; some drawn to extremist messaging may choose to fight abroad, but many more may instead opt to remain in the country. In addition, the rapid decline of the Islamic State's military position in Syria and Iraq is also likely to both inhibit Azerbaijani foreign fighter flow and compel a return of fighters to Azerbaijan en masse. More broadly speaking, the repressive state apparatus in Azerbaijan may be seeking to eliminate perceived threats to its stability, but political crackdowns only create opportunities for forces that operate outside of typical channels of political expression, including for Islamists.

#### *About the Author*

Arzu Geybulla is an Azerbaijani columnist and journalist focusing on human rights and press freedom in Azerbaijan. Geybulla has written for Al Jazeera, Open Democracy, Eurasianet, Foreign Policy, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Meydan TV, Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso, and Global Voices. She was the recipient of the 2014 Vaclav Havel Journalism Fellowship with Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and was featured on the BBC's 100 Women Changemakers in 2014. In 2016, she was Central Asia Azerbaijan Program Fellow at George Washington University. Geybulla currently lives in Istanbul.

5 <<http://www.rferl.org/a/azerbaijan-real-movement-iran-meeting/28270497.html>>

## CHRONICLE

## 7 February – 2 April 2017

7 February 2017	The Georgian Prime Minister's special representative for relations with Russia Zurab Abashidze meets with Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Grigory Karasin in Prague to discuss trade and economic relations as part of an informal bilateral dialogue launched in 2012
10 February 2017	Georgian Foreign Minister Mikheil Janelidze meets with the new US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson during an official visit in Washington to build contacts with the new administration and discuss the security environment in the Caucasus region
13 February 2017	Georgian Foreign Minister Mikheil Janelidze meets with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev and Foreign Minister Elmar Mammadyarov during a visit to Baku and underlines the good strategic relations between the two countries as a solid basis for future cooperation
13 February 2017	The Georgian National Security Council's Secretariat announces the launch of discussions on a "unified" National Security Strategy
16 February 2017	NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg says that NATO will continue to work together with Georgia to help it reach the goal of NATO membership following a NATO–Georgia Commission meeting
19 February 2017	Thousands of protesters rally in support of the Georgian TV channel Rustavi 2 demanding justice and fairness in an ongoing dispute over the ownership of the channel
20 February 2017	The Georgian Foreign Ministry says that it does not recognize a constitutional referendum held in the Nagorno Karabakh region
23 February 2017	Armenian Prime Minister Karen Karapetyan meets with Georgian officials during a visit to Tbilisi to discuss bilateral cooperation and emphasizes the good neighbourly relations between the two countries
23 February 2017	The United National Movement (UNM) opposition party in Georgia calls for the creation of a parliamentary commission of inquiry on the transit agreement with Russian company Gazprom
27 February 2017	EU Commissioner for Migration, Home Affairs and Citizenship Dimitris Avramopoulos visits Tbilisi to congratulate the Georgian leadership on the EU Council's final decision on visa liberalization for Georgian citizens
27 February 2017	The European Union and Armenia agree on a new deal to strengthen political relations during a visit by Armenian President Serzh Sarkisian to Brussels
1 March 2017	Armenian Prime Minister Karen Karapetyan denies reports of discussions with Georgian officials about the possible reopening of the railway link between Russia and Georgia via Abkhazia
5 March 2017	The application by former South Ossetian leader Eduard Kokoity to take part in the presidential elections scheduled for April is rejected by the South Ossetian Central Election Commission.
8 March 2017	Armenian President Serzh Sarkisian meets with French President Francois Hollande in Paris to sign agreements on tourism, the creation of a French University in Armenia and research cooperation
9 March 2017	The Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) announces Azerbaijan's suspension from the organization and states that Azerbaijan "lacks an enabling environment for civil society"
10 March 2017	The Azerbaijani Parliament approves new legislation tightening Internet regulations by prohibiting material promoting violence, religious extremism and terrorism
12 March 2017	Parliamentary elections are held in Abkhazia with 12 candidates winning a seat in the first round of voting
16 March 2017	In support of Georgia's territorial integrity and sovereignty, the United States do not recognize parliamentary elections held in Abkhazia
16 March 2017	Georgian President Giorgi Margvelashvili joins the fifth Baku Global Forum hosted by Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev
17 March 2017	Several hundred people protest the death of an activist as a result of a hunger strike in Yerevan
21 March 2017	Russian President Vladimir Putin meets with South Ossetian leader Leonid Tibilov in Moscow to discuss security and defense capacity building in the breakaway region
21 March 2017	Georgian President Giorgi Margvelashvili and Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili visit the town of Marneuli in the Georgian region of Kvemo Kartli to join the festivities on the occasion of Nowruz, which is celebrated by Muslims in Georgia and is an official holiday since 2010

22 March 2017	The Georgian Parliament overturns a presidential veto on a new surveillance bill which foresees the creation of a special agency to conduct surveillance operations
23 March 2017	Georgia's National Security Council meets to discuss Georgia–NATO relations, the security environment in the Black Sea region and the new initiative for a “unified” National Security Strategy
27 March 2017	Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili holds talks with his Ukrainian counterpart Volodymyr Groysman on the sidelines of the GUAM summit in Kyiv to discuss trade and economic cooperation in energy, infrastructure and agriculture
28 March 2017	Georgian President Giorgi Margvelashvili and Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili state that residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia can benefit from visa-free travel to the European Union
28 March 2017	At the request of Ukraine, the United Nations Security Council holds a meeting behind closed doors on the situation in the Georgian breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia
30 March 2017	Georgian President Giorgi Margvelashvili makes a first symbolic visa-free trip to Lithuania accompanied by ethnic Abkhaz and Ossetian citizens
31 March 2017	Russia and the Georgian breakaway region of South Ossetia sign a new defense agreement to formally merge South Ossetia's military with the Russian armed forces during a ceremony attended by Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu
2 April 2017	According to official results, the ruling Republican Party of Armenia wins the parliamentary elections in Armenia with about 50 percent of the vote

*For the full chronicle since 2009 see <[www.laender-analysen.de/cad](http://www.laender-analysen.de/cad)>*

**ABOUT THE CAUCASUS ANALYTICAL DIGEST****Editors**

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