

The North Caucasus Insurgency and Syria: An Exported Jihad?

Europe Report N°238 | 16 March 2016

Table of Contents

Executive Summary.....	i
Recommendations.....	iii
I. Introduction	1
II. The Failure of Regional Jihad or How Syria Hijacked the Agenda	4
A. “A Thousand Times Harder than Syria”	5
B. From Regional to Global.....	7
C. Jihadists or New Muhajirun?	9
D. Syria, Iraq and the North Caucasians	12
III. Russian State Security Responses.....	16
A. Controlling the Outflow: Before and After the Sochi Olympics	16
B. Clamping Down on Salafi Activism and Mosques.....	19
IV. Why IS?.....	24
A. A Religious Utopia	24
B. Efficient Islamic Governance.....	26
C. Welfare and Revenge	27
D. Effective Propaganda	29
V. Prevention and De-radicalisation	30
VI. Conclusion	35
APPENDICES	
A. Map of the North Caucasus and Parts of the Middle East	36

Executive Summary

Violence in Russia's North Caucasus, which has experienced deadly conflict for two decades, is down substantially the last two years – partly because most of its radicals have joined the foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq. By June 2015, most North Caucasus insurgent groups had sworn allegiance to the Islamic State (IS), later to be designated its new “province”, Vilayat Kavkaz. Some small groups in Dagestan and Kabardino-Balkaria remain loyal to the Caucasus Emirate (CE), the regional violent jihadist organisation, but its support and capacity are now minimal. Russia and IS are in direct conflict: security officials announced they prevented a number of IS-inspired terrorist acts in 2015; IS pledged to harm Russia and claimed destruction of the October flight over the Sinai Desert in which 224 Russians returning from Egypt died and two attacks in Dagestan. In parallel to protecting its national security, Russia should invest in effective de-radicalisation, while urgently addressing legitimate grievances in the North Caucasus better and systematically coping with the root causes of its violence.

The conditions for those pursuing militant jihad in the North Caucasus qualitatively changed in the lead-up to the 2014 Sochi Olympics. Russian security agencies defeated and paralysed the CE, whose operations and communication became largely impossible at the same time as what IS calls its “five-star jihad” became increasingly popular. A few thousand North Caucasians joined that fight from their homeland and their diasporas in Europe and the Middle East. The export of the North Caucasus jihad to the Middle East has made Russia new enemies and transformed the problem from national to global.

Since the pre-Olympic clampdown on Salafism in Russia, Turkey has become a popular destination for both Russian jihadists transiting to Syria and peaceful conservative Muslims with families who made it their new home. The “new *muhajirun*” (immigrants) from Russia have formed tight, rather self-sustainable communities mostly in and around Istanbul. Until IS-inspired terrorist acts hit Turkey in 2015, the authorities had not shown much concern with either group. Russian-speaking IS liaisons who helped new arrivals cross the Syrian border operated effectively. Several high-profile CE operatives and ideologues have reportedly also worked from Turkey, facilitating transit to groups other than IS. In addition, eight figures linked to the Chechen insurgency have been assassinated in Turkey since 2003, the most recent in 2015, allegedly by Russian federal security service (FSB) proxies. Turkish authorities say they often lack sufficient evidence on which to act more resolutely but legally against such activities. They have, however, considerably tightened security recently.

North Caucasians fight in Iraq and Syria not only for IS, but also for Jabhat al-Nusra, as well as in rebel groups not affiliated with either and mostly under Chechen commanders. Due to their reputation as fearless fighters, Chechens are often promoted quickly to command of small groups, or to second- and third-rank positions in IS. Abu Omar (Umar) Shishani, the most senior-positioned North Caucasian in IS, was reportedly wounded or killed in a recent U.S. strike. His military achievements, particularly leading operations to capture Iraq's Anbar province and parts of eastern Syria, reportedly helped Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi to declare his caliphate and put Rus-

sia high on the agenda of IS. In an effort to strengthen their power in IS, Shishani and his ambitious confidante and propagandist from Karachay-Cherkessia, Abu Jihad, set out in 2014 to co-opt the North Caucasus insurgency. This eventually resulted in the almost overwhelming defection of North Caucasus fighters to IS.

Russian security services allegedly opened borders for local radicals to leave the North Caucasus before the Olympics, even though Russia has criminalised participation in armed groups abroad which contradict the “interests of the Russian Federation”. Since the second half of 2014, however, the authorities have reduced the outflow and systematically hunted down recruiters and fundraisers, as well as potential fighters, while also intensifying pressure on non-violent Salafis, especially in Dagestan. In Chechnya, policies toward Salafis have traditionally been even harsher. The Chechen interior ministry routinely carries out campaigns against them; reportedly, many were detained in 2015 and some disappeared late in the year. The Ingush leader, Yunus-Bek Yevkurov, pursues a non-confrontational policy; he prevented official clergy from seizing the most important Salafi mosque in Nasyr-Kort and tries to consolidate believers in the republic. Similarly, Kabardino-Balkaria fundamentalists do not complain of systematic security-service harassment.

The region’s Salafis emphasise that religion is a key motivation for North Caucasians to join violent jihad in Syria. The immediate religious context is influenced by deeper underlying grievances that drive radicalisation, including unresolved conflict, often unaccountable and non-transparent governance, poor socio-economic conditions and a deep sense of injustice and disenfranchisement. The opportunity presented by IS gives violent Caucasus jihadists an alternative to a suicidal enterprise at home, making departure to pursue religious commitments even more compelling.

Radicals convince youth that *hijra* (emigration) to IS or fighting for it is the individual obligation (*fardh ‘ajn*) of each Muslim, and those who abstain fail in duty to Allah. IS in turn portrays itself as a feasible political project with an efficient Islamic government. Claiming to be an egalitarian welfare project, it provides flats and subsidies for fighters’ families. It likewise offers opportunity for merit-based promotion and publicised revenge for perceived global humiliation of Muslims.

If powerful reinforcements for IS from the North Caucasus are to be staunch, Russia needs to develop a de-radicalisation strategy that pools intellectual resources from various fields and across disciplines, including experts on the region, open-minded security officials, educators and moderate religious leaders. Law-abiding fundamentalist leaders can play a significant role in influencing young people. Creation of controlled but safe channels for return and programs to prevent radicalisation in prisons are also important. Accounts of those who have returned disillusioned from Syria and Iraq are perhaps the most powerful weapon against recruitment.

Recommendations

To address the root causes of radicalisation

To the government of the Russian Federation:

1. Recognise that unresolved grievances and conflicts, as well as limited development opportunities are strongly conducive to radicalism, and address them vigorously by establishing more democratic procedures and rule of law; ensuring reasonable decentralisation, socio-economic development and youth jobs; and improving social services, especially education.
2. Encourage genuine transformation of sectarian conflict between traditional and fundamentalist Muslims by facilitating Sufi-Salafi dialogue in Dagestan, Chechnya and Ingushetia, and increasing efforts to integrate non-violent Salafi communities into the social mainstream across the North Caucasus.
3. Improve law-enforcement agency investigations and support efforts to pursue and prosecute corruption and economic crimes; and end at the same time law-enforcement impunity and investigate systematically and effectively allegations of serious human rights violations.
4. Strengthen the focus of youth policies in the North Caucasus on preventing idleness and encouraging other ways of self-realisation; and devise more sophisticated ways to combat radical influences from abroad.

To prevent further radicalisation

To the government of the Russian Federation:

5. Strengthen investigators' capacity to prosecute jihadists returning from the Middle East fairly; and reward voluntary contributions to anti-extremism propaganda by softening sentences.
6. Distinguish between violent and law-abiding fundamentalists, focusing law-enforcement efforts on the former; cease repression of non-violent Salafis, especially in Chechnya, unless they violate the law; and oppose any discriminatory rhetoric and practices targeting individuals for religious beliefs.

To the interior ministry of the Republic of Dagestan:

7. Halt discriminatory practices against non-violent fundamentalist believers, including registering them as extremists, and – other than within the framework of a criminal case – detaining them, restricting their movements and submitting them to unsanctioned searches and blood and saliva tests.
8. Cease pressuring and closing Salafi mosques other than after a credible investigation and pursuant to a judicial decision.

To facilitate de-radicalisation

To the National Anti-Terrorism Committee:

9. Strengthen soft-power counter-insurgency, including creation of exit programs for radicals who have not committed grave crimes and wish to return from Syria and Iraq.
10. Revive and strengthen the mandates of the republican commissions for the rehabilitation of fighters to deal with returning jihadists; and engage more constructively with families of jihadists and law-abiding fundamentalist leaders in joint efforts to combat violent jihadism ideologically.

To the government of the Russian Federation:

11. Create a de-radicalisation research group of independent experts, law-enforcement and security service professionals, educators and media and religious leaders, including law-abiding Salafis, and task it to develop a feasible de-radicalisation methodology and government program.
12. Consider setting up a federal program aimed at de-radicalisation of Islamist extremists, rehabilitation of ex-jihadists and prevention of radicalisation in prisons and enhance cooperation and information exchange with European countries, including Turkey.

Brussels, 16 March 2016

The North Caucasus Insurgency and Syria: An Exported Jihad?

I. Introduction¹

The North Caucasus conflict has been among Europe's deadliest for two decades. Two wars in Chechnya caused tens of thousands of deaths among Chechens and Russian military, but also claimed the lives of Russian civilians beyond Chechnya. The anti-Russian insurgency that emerged in the mid-1990s as part of the Chechen separatist movement transformed into a regional jihad movement by 2007. The Caucasus Emirate (CE) declared by its then leader, Dokku Umarov, loosely associated with al-Qaeda and designated as a terrorist organisation in Russia, the U.S. and European Union (EU), aimed to create a Sharia (Islamic law)-based Islamist state in the entire North Caucasus. Comprised of five *vilayats* (provinces) – Dagestan, Nohchi-Cho (Chechnya), Galchaiche (Ingushetia and Ossetia), KBK (Kabarda-Balkariya-Karachay), and the Nogay Steppe – it is deeply embedded in local conflicts and grievances, despite some foreign influences.

Since the beginning of the second Chechen war in 1999, insurgents have committed over 75 major terror acts against soft targets in Russian cities, most recently in 2013,² in addition to hundreds of attacks against members of the security services and official religious and political leaders in the North Caucasus.³ Since 2009, the epicentre of violence has shifted from Chechnya to Dagestan, which was turned into a full guerrilla war zone by daily attacks between 2010 and 2012.⁴ 2014, however, saw a remarkable reduction in violence: victims dropped by 46 per cent, which some experts attributed mainly to security-service successes and others to a mass exodus of fighters to Iraq and Syria. A further 51 per cent reduction took place in 2015.⁵

¹ This report follows the publication of Crisis Group Special Report *Exploiting Disorder: al-Qaeda and the Islamic State* on 14 March 2016, which launched a project on violent extremism and modern conflict, reflecting Crisis Group's broadening focus on these issues.

² On 29 December 2013, a suicide bomber blew himself up at a train station in Volgograd killing eighteen and injuring 44. Next day another suicide bomber blew up a trolleybus in Volgograd, killing ten. "Terrorist acts committed by suicide-bombers on the territory of the Russia Federation", The Caucasus Knot, 17 December 2015.

³ "Россия: Хроника террора" ["Russia: The chronicle of terror"], Caucasian Knot, 17 December 2015. Since 2000, the insurgency has carried out at least 83 suicide attacks in the North Caucasus, killing at least 1,325 and injuring 3,293. "Террористические акты, совершенные террористами-смертниками на территории РФ" ["Terrorist attacks carried out by suicide-bombers in Russia"], Caucasian Knot, 17 December 2015.

⁴ Crisis Group Europe Report N°221, *The North Caucasus: The Challenges of Integration (II), Islam, the Insurgency and Counter-insurgency*, 19 October 2012. Oleg Orlov, Ekaterina Sokirianskaia, "Новый курс Магомедова? Причины гражданского противостояния, ситуация с правами человека и попытка консолидации общества в Республике Дагестан. Март 2010-март 2011". Москва, "Звенья" 2012. ["Magomedov's new deal? Reasons of civic conflict, situation with human rights and attempts at consolidating society in the Republic of Dagestan, March 2010-March 2011."], Moscow, Zvenya, 2012.

⁵ Caucasian Knot, 5 February 2016. This includes victims among civilians, military and the insurgents.

State security services continue heavy-handed counter-insurgency, while the popularity of jihad in the Middle East grows among regional radicals. A 21 June 2015 joint statement by insurgent commanders claimed that all CE *vilayats* had sworn allegiance to the Islamic State (IS) leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. The turn toward IS began in late 2014, when two Dagestan militant groups swore loyalty, including the amir, Rustam Aselderov.⁶ The then CE leader, Aliaskhab Kebekov (Ali Abu Muhammad), dismissed and replaced Aselderov, strongly confirmed CE's link with al-Qaeda and banned followers from interactions with IS. After security services killed Kebekov in April 2015, however, the pro-IS tendency strengthened. CE's strongest military commander, Chechnya amir Aslan Buytukaev, swore allegiance to Baghdadi on behalf of the Chechen fighters, and other *vilayats* followed. In June, IS accepted the allegiance of the Caucasus mujahidin and announced creation of its new province – Vilayat Kavkaz – with Aselderov as amir.⁷

Some of Dagestan's small groups stayed loyal to what remained of CE, as well as most of KBK and Nogay Steppe *vilayats*. Robert Zankishiev, the one jihadist who swore allegiance to IS on behalf of Kabardino-Balkar insurgents and who was killed by the security services in November 2015, was widely believed to represent only his own small group and to have defected in the hope of getting financial and political support from IS in his competition for influence with the KBK's recognised amir, Zalim Shebzukhov. The small Nogay Steppe *vilayat* is thought to have abstained from declaring allegiance to IS in order to wait out the *fitna* (discord) by keeping a low profile.⁸

IS has repeatedly threatened Russian and North Caucasus authorities. On 3 September 2014, it posted a video threatening war in the North Caucasus; later that month, the notorious field commander Abu Omar Shishani (widely known as Umar Shishani) promised a \$5 million reward for assassination of the Chechen leader,

⁶ First the leader of Dagestan's small Aukh (Khasavyurt) group, Suleiman Zailanabidov, on 21 November 2014, then Aselderov, together with the amir of Makhachkala, Abu Muhammad Agachaulsky, on 19 December. Aselderov, an Avar from Kalmykiya, joined the insurgency in 2007 and is suspected of several brutal crimes; Zainulabidov, a Dagestani Chechen, according to sources, was detained in the Almaty airport in October 2014 in camouflage clothes, with a portable radio and Islamist literature. He later reappeared in the Caucasus. Prior to his detention in Kazakhstan, he was accused by Dagestani fighters of creating *fitna* (discord) in the insurgency. "В Казахстане задержан уроженец Чечни, предположительно воевавший на Украине" ["A Chechen native, who was allegedly fighting in the east of Ukraine, detained in Kazakhstan"], Caucasian Knot, 22 October 2014; "Дарестанского шейха взорвала бывшая актриса" ["The Dagestani sheikh was blasted by a former actress"], Lenta.ru, 30 August 2012; "Убитые в Дагестане охотники стали жертвой 'кадарского джамаата'" ["The killed Dagestani hunters fell victim to the Kadar Jamaat"], Lenta.ru, 28 February 2012.

⁷ "Исламское государство' приняло присягу боевиков Северного Кавказа" ["The Islamic State accepted declarations of allegiance sworn by the North Caucasus insurgents"], Caucasian Knot, 24 June 2015; "Кавказский эмират, раздираемый на части ИГИЛ и 'Аль-Каидой'" ["The Caucasus Emirate torn to pieces by ISIS and al-Qaeda"], Inosmi.ru, 3 April 2015; "ИГ объявило о присяге всех боевиков Северного Кавказа альБагдади" ["ISIS announced all North Caucasus insurgents swore allegiance to al-Baghdadi"], Caucasian Knot, 23 June 2015.

⁸ "Политологи: 'Имарат Кавказ' в Кабардино-Балкарии неуступил натиску ИГИЛ" ["Political scientists: the Caucasus Emirate in Kabardino-Balkaria did not cede to ISIS pressure"], Caucasian Knot, 12 November 2015; Crisis Group interview, Akhmet Yarlykapov, Senior researcher, MGIMO, email interview, October 2015.

Ramzan Kadyrov, and smaller sums for the killing of nine associates.⁹ After Russia began to bomb IS in Syria on 30 September 2015, the movement's press secretary, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, declared jihad against it, and in November, IS released a video with a *nasheed* (Islamic song) promising "a sea of blood" to flood Russia "soon, very soon".¹⁰ A few days before, IS had claimed responsibility for the deaths of 224 Russians on a plane that crashed on a flight from Egypt.¹¹ The National Anti-Terrorism Committee said in early 2016 it had uncovered several IS-affiliated groups that entered Russia to plot terrorism.¹² Even though jihadist activity fell in Russia in 2015, the security challenge remains serious.

Fieldwork and interviews for this report, which explores the ideological shifts and policy responses specific to the North Caucasus aspect of the wider international threat IS poses, were carried out in Dagestan, Moscow, Istanbul, Ankara and London from November 2015 to January 2016.

⁹ "Pressa Today: один из лидеров 'Исламского государства' объявил награду за убийство Рамзана КадYROва" ["Pressa Today: an IS leader announced a reward for assassination of Ramzan Kadyrov"], *Caucasian Knot*, 24 September 2015.

¹⁰ "ИГИЛ пригрозило России 'морем крови': каких терактов ожидать" ["ISIS threatened Russia with 'a sea of blood': what terrorist attacks to expect"], *MK.ru*, 12 November 2015.

¹¹ "Russia confirms Sinai plane crash was the work of terrorists", *The Washington Post*, 17 November 2015.

¹² "НАК сообщил о предотвращении готовившихся ИГ терактов в России" ["NAC announced the impending IS attacks in Russia had been prevented"], *Forbes Russia*, 29 January 2016. Apart from terrorist organisations, more than 40 Syrian insurgent groups, including the powerful Islamist faction Ahrar al-Sham, have called on regional states to ally against Russia and Iran in Syria, while 53 Saudi opposition clerics called for jihad against Syrian authorities, Russia and Iran after Russian airstrikes in Syria. "Syrian rebels call for regional alliance against Russia and Iran" Reuters, 5 October 2015; Angus McDowall, "Saudi opposition clerics make sectarian call to jihad in Syria", Reuters, 5 October 2015.

II. The Failure of Regional Jihad or How Syria Hijacked the Agenda

North Caucasians have fought in Syria since the beginning of the war. According to official figures, 2,900 Russian citizens are in combat there and in Iraq; the actual figure could be much higher, but there is considerable disagreement among the experts.¹³ Up to 5,000 Russian citizens may be fighting in ISIS, according to the director of the Anti-terrorist Centre of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), a regional organisation of some of the former Soviet republics.¹⁴ Based on various official sources, some 900 may be Dagestanis, of whom 105 have been killed;¹⁵ also, 485 Chechens, of whom 44 have returned and 104 have been killed; as well as 128 from Kabardino-Balkaria and at least 30 from Ingushetia, seventeen of whom were killed and six of whom returned home and surrendered to authorities.¹⁶

The official figures, however, include only those whom the security services could track. Some independent observers question this data. One notes, for example, that according to the official figures, “there are currently 250 Chechen fighters in Syria, which evidently does not reflect the current reality. Each Chechen commander currently fighting for the IS, al-Nusra Front or another group opposed to [Syrian President] Bashar al-Assad might easily have 250 Chechen militants under his command”.¹⁷ Up to 100 may be Kists – the ethnic Chechen group inhabiting Georgia’s Pankisi Gorge;¹⁸ many others come from Chechen diasporas in Europe.¹⁹ Chechen security officers reportedly informally acknowledge much higher numbers and that they cannot effectively prevent the outflow.²⁰

¹³ “ФСБ: на Северном Кавказе из 26 лидеров бандгрупп, присягнувших ИГ, нейтрализовано 20” [“FSB: 20 of 26 leaders of the North Caucasus insurgency groups who swore allegiance to IS are liquidated”], TASS, 15 December 2015. The official statistics are half Russian President Vladimir Putin’s number, “На стороне ‘Исламского государства’ воюют от 5 до 7 тысяч выходцев из СНГ, заявил Владимир Путин” [“Vladimir Putin: 5,000-7,000 CIS natives are fighting for IS”], Portal-credo.ru, 16 October 2015.

¹⁴ “До 5 тысяч россиян воюют на стороне ‘Исламского государства’” [“Up to five thousand Russians are fighting on the side of the Islamic State”], *Kommersant*, 17 June 2015.

¹⁵ “В Дагестане назвали число примкнувших к ИГ жителей республики” [“Dagestan reported the number of residents who had joined IS”], Lenta.ru, 10 December 2015. Crisis Group interview, source in security services, Makhachkala, Dagestan, November 2015.

¹⁶ “Кадуров сообщил о почти 500 примкнувших к ИГ чеченцах” [“Kadyrov reported almost 500 Chechens had joined IS”], Caucasian Knot, 22 November 2015. “СКР насчитал 130 бойцов ДАИШ из Кабардино-Балкарии” [“ICR counted 130 fighters of DAESH in Kabardino-Balkaria”], *Vestnik Kavkaza*, 24 December 2014. “Евкуров назвал число примкнувших к ИГ жителей Ингушетии” [“Yevkurov announced the number of residents of Ingushetia who joined ISIS”], *Vzglyad*, 29 October 2015.

¹⁷ Mayerbek Vatchagaev, “Russian Intelligence Experiences Setback in Effort to Penetrate Islamic State Network in Syria”, The Jamestown Foundation, 10 December 2015.

¹⁸ Russia has repeatedly accused Georgia of breeding terrorism in its mostly ethnic Chechen-populated Pankisi Gorge; Georgian authorities deny this, while acknowledging that around 40 persons have left for IS. The Georgian government has imposed strict controls on their return and offered special job and development programs to Pankisi youth to prevent radicalisation. “Russian foreign minister says Daesh [IS] uses Pankisi Gorge for training”, *Georgia Today*, 26 January 2016; “Defence minister’s special offer to Pankisi youth”, agenda.ge, 11 January 2016.

¹⁹ “Выходцы с Кавказа в рядах ИГ (ИГИЛ)” [“The Caucasians in the ranks of IS (ISIS)”], Caucasian Knot, 15 December 2015.

²⁰ Crisis Group interview, Chechen expert, Moscow, November 2015.

Others argue that the official numbers may actually be inflated, as the North Caucasus groups in Iraq and Syria are all very small. The U.S.-based intelligence consulting firm Soufan Group believes the number of Russian citizens fighting in those two countries has tripled since mid-2014, from 800 to 2,400.²¹

The one point of general agreement is that the outflow continues. According to Chechen officials, another 100 residents of the republic joined IS between August and November 2015.²²

In the conflict's early days, many went intending to stay for only two or three months, to fulfil what they considered their religious obligation. "They went there as if it were the *hajj*", a brother of one explained.²³ Many quickly went home disillusioned, especially when *fitna* intensified between the groups. "He was soon disillusioned with what he called injustice, treason and the senseless deprivation of men of their lives; there was nothing there that had anything to do with religion", a Dagestani lawyer said of a client.

Article 208 of the Criminal Code was amended in 2013 to criminalise participation in armed formations abroad that "contradict the interests of the Russian Federation"; in 2014, related prison terms were increased to up to ten years. Security services started to arrest returnees at the borders, open criminal cases and, according to relatives and human rights groups, often mistreat them in preliminary detention.²⁴ The return of the disillusioned, as well as of hardened radicals, was impeded; those who intended to join IS had to consider the consequences of not being able to come back. Nonetheless, the outflow continued.

Two sets of factors account for the popularity of the migration to Syria and Iraq. The first relates to the changed conditions for military jihad and peaceful Salafi *dawa* (proselytism) in the North Caucasus; the second to the appeal of IS for parts of North Caucasus radical Islamist youth, the ideological alternative it offers and its claim to address the root causes of local and global conflicts.

A. "A Thousand Times Harder than Syria"

Starting from early 2013, jihadist groups in the North Caucasus were crushed and non-violent Salafism suppressed. The latter was a significant change that followed a short opening in the second half of Dmitry Medvedev's presidency. Beginning in 2010, the Russian and Dagestani authorities tested novel methods to fight extremism, including soft-power ones. The approach toward non-violent Salafis was liberalised first in Dagestan, then also in Ingushetia and Karachay-Cherkessia: leaders were allowed to participate in public life and open mosques, kindergartens, madrasahs and charities. A dialogue was launched in Dagestan between Sufi and Salafi representatives to overcome their deep sectarian dispute. It was pursued by the republic's Spiritual Board of Muslims (Muftiyat) on the Sufi side and the Association of

²¹ "Эксперты: Количество воюющих за ИГ россиян увеличилось втрое" ["Experts: The number of Russian citizens fighting for IS has tripled"], Rosbalt, 9 December 2015.

²² "Kadyrov reported", op. cit.

²³ Crisis Group interviews, Salafi activists, brother, Dagestan, November 2015.

²⁴ Eg, Akhmaev and Garsultaev cases (Chechnya) and that of five fighters from Novosaitli (Dagestan). Crisis Group interviews, Elena Milashina, *Novaya Gazeta* reporter and Chechnya expert, relatives of fighters, torture victim in Dagestan, December 2015, January 2016.

Scholars of Akhlu-Sunnah for Salafis.²⁵ A commission for rehabilitation of fighters was created under the republic's president, which facilitated fighters' reintegration. In 2012, the number of victims of conflict in Dagestan fell by 15 per cent, and fewer youths joined the insurgency.²⁶

But despite this positive evolution, the run-up to the Sochi Olympics saw a roll-back of all the soft measures. The republics' Commissions for the Rehabilitation of Fighters stopped functioning. The security services invested enormous efforts to suppress the insurgency, especially in Dagestan, carrying out hundreds of operations, making movement, logistics and communications extremely difficult and killing both leaders and rank-and-file. They traced insurgents on mobile and internet networks, followed wives, infiltrated webs of accomplices and poisoned food that was sent to the fighters in the forests. In parallel, they acted against non-violent Salafi activity: many mosques, prayer houses, educational initiatives and charities were closed; there were mass arrests of believers from mosques and *halal* cafés, and leaders were harassed.²⁷

The CE was largely defeated, and jihad became too difficult to pursue in the region. According to a local activist, "the insurgency here had become a one-way ticket. One could hope to become an amir of a sector at best, and ... have to sleep on the snow, in the dirt".²⁸ Insurgents became very cautious with external communications, suspecting every new recruit of spying and quarantining newcomers for several months prior to accepting them. Joining and contacting the insurgency became very difficult. North Caucasus jihad, a social network user said, had become "a 1,000 times harder than in Syria".²⁹

The crackdown also made North Caucasus jihad "uninspiring" for the radicals. CE lost its charisma when it became clear that, despite Umarov's threats, the emirate was unable to disrupt the Olympics. The old leader was fatally poisoned in a special operation by the Russian security services six months before Sochi.³⁰ CE announced this and elected a new leader, Aliaskhab Kebekov, after the Games in March 2014. A radical Islamic cleric rather than a fighter, he imposed strict limits on methods that could be used in jihad, banning suicide bombing, attacks on civilians and their property and women's participation.³¹ These restrictions alienated the more radical and criminal parts of the insurgency. IS propagandists mocked the fighters for "eating leaves in the parochial backwaters of Dagestan", while their movement fought "a five star jihad".³² Hundreds went to Syria, mostly new recruits, because it was hard for those in hiding to cross the border.

²⁵ Medvedev was president 2008-2012. "The Association of Akhlu-Sunna scholars in Dagestan", organised in 2010, included Salafi clerics who participated in negotiations with the government and Sufis. The Muftiyat is a regional religious body affiliated with the state which voluntarily unites Muslim religious institutions that recognise the authority of the official clergy.

²⁶ Crisis Group Report, *The Challenges of Integration (II)*, op. cit.

²⁷ Crisis Group Europe Report N°226, *The North Caucasus: The Challenges of Integration (III), Governance, Elections, Rule of Law*, 6 September 2013.

²⁸ Crisis Group interview, Salafi leader, Makhachkala, November 2015.

²⁹ Crisis Group monitoring of jihadist social media, November 2015.

³⁰ "Источник: Докку Умарова отравил агент ФСБ" ["Source: Dokku Umarov was poisoned by a FSB agent"], МК.ru, 20 March 2014.

³¹ Crisis Group interviews, Dagestan, Istanbul, December 2015.

³² Joanna Paraszczuk, "Akhmad Medinsky addresses 'Vilayat Kavkaz' from Baiji", www.chechensin syria.com, 20 July 2015.

B. *From Regional to Global*

Leading Salafi figures in Dagestan, including the moderates, were now under acute security-service pressure and could not continue their activity at home. Many fled, mostly to Turkey. IS sought strategically to recruit influential figures, charismatic preachers with social capital both in the North Caucasus and among North Caucasians in Turkey. According to a Salafi activist, “IS tried to create a feeling that the cream of the nation was with them”.³³ “They were systematically head-hunting”, a Salafi intellectual in Istanbul who turned away an approach said.³⁴

Some were radicalised and joined IS, among them notably Kamil Sultanakhmedov (Kamil Abu Sultan), who lived between Turkey and Dagestan in 2013-2014, until a criminal case was opened against him in Russia. Highly visible, he participated in the Salafi-government dialogue and was a frequent visitor to Moscow and an interlocutor of federal experts, including those at the National Anti-Terrorist Committee. “Initially he was strongly against IS, he was mocking them, but then he started to change. ... He is very emotional, and fell victim to their propaganda”, his former colleague said. Kamil came from a well-connected, affluent family in southern Dagestan, studied in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Egypt but did not finish his degree. Ambitious but insufficiently educated, he saw IS as attractive once he faced a criminal charge and Dagestan became inaccessible to him.³⁵

IS also brought in two other Salafi celebrities: the charismatic Nadir Medetov (Nadir Abu Khalid) and Akhmad Medinsky.³⁶ These previously non-violent and popular Dagestani Salafi leaders went over in 2015 after becoming increasingly radical at home. Even though by then the law-abiding Salafi community had distanced itself from these leaders, many followers supported them, either by physically joining the jihad in Syria or “in their hearts and minds”.³⁷

Another category attracted to jihad in Syria were those radicals who had for years lived in diasporas. Over the last decade, many North Caucasus Salafis, especially those who had problems with the security services, resettled to Turkey and the Middle East, notably Egypt, which was preferred because it was cheaper and secure. A Salafi activist explained: “In Egypt you and your wife could live on \$300 a month; many went there to take courses in Arabic and Quran and ended up staying”.³⁸ Some were recruited there; others joined from Turkey, where they mostly had resettled after the overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood government in 2013.³⁹

Most new diaspora recruits were deeply religious Salafis, at some point pressured by the security services in their homeland. Among them, however, were also veterans or accomplices of the North Caucasus insurgency who escaped or fled after serving short prison terms. Syria was an opportunity to continue militant jihad, which was closed for them in the North Caucasus: they would be jailed the moment they returned to Russia.

³³ Crisis Group interview, Ikramudin Ataev, Salafi activist, Makhachkala, November 2015.

³⁴ Crisis Group interview, *muhajir* from Dagestan, Istanbul, December 2015.

³⁵ Crisis Group observations, interview, Salafi activist, Makhachkala, December 2015.

³⁶ “Надир абу Халид (Надир Медетов)” [“Nadir abu Khalid (Nadir Medetov)”], Caucasian Knot, 26 May 2015.

³⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Salafi activists, Dagestan, November 2015.

³⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Salafi activists, Makhachkala, November 2015.

³⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Salafi activists, Dagestan, Istanbul, November-December 2015.

Tens of thousands of Chechen refugees have sought asylum in Europe in the past two decades.⁴⁰ Some of these have reportedly joined IS, al-Nusra or independent groups. A Chechen activist in Scandinavia explained:

Chechens have very distinct motivations from the others; they will go anywhere [President] Putin's and Russia's interests are – to Ukraine, to Syria. I hear: "We will break two or three of his fingers abroad, and the rest will break themselves". In Syria, Chechens are fighting their own unfinished war.⁴¹

Some veteran Chechen fighters went to Syria after reportedly being asked to withdraw from Ukraine. The statement of a Chechen battalion fighting for Ukraine declares as its goal "the victory of Ukraine as the first step to liberation of other peoples subjugated by Russia".⁴² Some sources, including Europol, claim that most Chechens who participate in the Syria war come from Europe, where their parents moved as refugees.⁴³

Radicalisation of diaspora Chechens is mostly related to their unsuccessful integration and lack of meaning in their lives in their host countries, a Chechen journalist said:

They are not in their homeland, and in Europe they feel they are fifth-class citizens; they live on welfare; they have nothing to do. They communicate only with the same people as themselves. They don't integrate, and the longer they live in the diaspora, the more detached they are from the realities at home and in the societies where they live now. Anti-Russian sentiments are much stronger in the diasporas than in Chechnya itself. Many are in perpetual depression. They are very deeply affected by this depression and thus susceptible to radical propaganda.

"Psychological problems, isolation and depression are conducive to radicalisation: You feel that you are a plant, a plant that will never take root in this soil", another Chechen expert explained.⁴⁴

Many North Caucasus fighters in Syria, especially those directly from the region, have limited prior life experience and very parochial views of the world. A Dagestani migrant in Istanbul explained:

As a wave we all floated out of Russia, and all of a sudden, this Syrian story turned our people into global players. They didn't even realise this; they had not been prepared for this, but with our Dagestani village mentality, they entered into big global processes.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ "Annual Report on the Situation of Asylum in the European Union", European Asylum Support Office, July 2015. "In Poland, Chechen asylum seekers languish in limbo", Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 14 August 2013.

⁴¹ Crisis Group Skype interview, December 2015.

⁴² Jokhar Dudaev battalion statement on social networks.

⁴³ "North Caucasian fighters in Syria and Iraq and Russian language propaganda", Europol, 30 September 2015.

⁴⁴ Crisis Group Skype interviews, journalist, expert, January 2016.

⁴⁵ Crisis Group interview, Dagestani *muhajir*, Istanbul, December 2015.

C. *Jihadists or New Muhajirun?*

Since November 2015, the Russian authorities have openly blamed Turkey for supporting jihadists. Turkish officials deny this, while emphasising they have been left without international support for controlling the flow of transiting foreign fighters.⁴⁶ Experts began to speak of the “new *muhajirun*”, Muslims who make *hijra* (emigration to an Islamic country), before the Sochi Olympics games, when repressions against Salafis in Russia resulted in their mass exodus.⁴⁷

Most Russian *muhajirun* in Turkey are from Dagestan, Kabardino-Balkaria, Ingushetia, Tatarstan and Bashkortostan, but there are also some ethnic Russian Muslims and conservative Muscovites of Caucasus origins. Some have permanently resettled; others have brought their wives and children to benefit from more comfortable living conditions in accordance with their religious beliefs but spend their time engaged in small business between Russia and Istanbul.⁴⁸ Ethnic Russian converts to Islam mostly fled persecution at home; in Turkey some can work or study on Turkish academic scholarships. “There aren’t many Chechens here, and those who are, arrived more than ten years ago”, a Dagestani migrant said.⁴⁹ More recent Chechen migrants to Turkey are those who either were denied asylum in Europe or knew their chances of getting it were slim and never sought it.⁵⁰

It is difficult to give an exact number of Russian Muslims who have recently resettled to Turkey – estimates range from several thousand to tens of thousands.⁵¹ “I know there were 600 Dagestani families in our neighbourhood a year and a half ago, lists were made for charity purposes”, a North Caucasus migrant in Istanbul said.⁵² Most North Caucasus *muhajirun* opt for Istanbul and nearby areas and settle in several conservative neighbourhoods, forming almost self-sustainable Russian-speaking communities. “We have our own taxi drivers, doctors, teachers. Many people don’t have all proper documents and thus medical insurance, so everyone knows a Russian-speaking paediatrician in their neighbourhood; there is also a school and a kindergarten, but kids also go to Turkish schools even if parents don’t have proper documents”, a North Caucasus migrant recounted. Making ends meet is not a big problem, she continued:

In Turkey there is a well-developed Islamic charity system. Even if you wanted to, you will not die of hunger here. As a wife of a Muslim who is in prison [in Russia], I get 500 liras (around \$165) per month. They also helped me to get all this second hand furniture and carpets for the house.⁵³

⁴⁶ Crisis Group interviews, officials, Ankara, February 2016.

⁴⁷ Crisis Group interview, Grigory Shvedov, chief editor, The Caucasus Knot, Moscow, November 2015. “Гумер Исаев о ‘новых мухаджирах’ в Турции” [“Gumer Isaev on the ‘new muhajirun’ in Turkey”], Caucasian Knot blog, 7 November 2015.

⁴⁸ Crisis Group interview, North Caucasus journalist, Istanbul, December 2015.

⁴⁹ Crisis Group interview, Dagestani *muhajir*, Istanbul, December 2015.

⁵⁰ Crisis Group Skype interview, Chechen activist in Europe, December 2015.

⁵¹ “Российские мусульмане в Турции: против Москвы, но не ВИГИЛ” [“Russian Muslims in Turkey: against Moscow, but not with ISIS”], BBC Russia, 18 December 2015.

⁵² Crisis Group interview, Dagestani *muhajir*, Istanbul, December 2015.

⁵³ Crisis group interview. North Caucasus migrant, Istanbul, December 2015.

Nonetheless, integration into Turkish society has not been easy, an Istanbul-based Dagestani noted:

Nobody wants to work as a waiter in a café, not everyone wants to do hard manual jobs. Turkey has very strict limitations on legal employment of foreigners. It's very hard to start a business or engage in trade, but the mentality of our people is to have something of their own, let it be a small kiosk, but their own. Whatever business they can start is linked to Dagestan. Often it is small-scale trade, but because most of these *muhajirun* have security problems in Dagestan, they cannot easily travel to control it.⁵⁴

In recent years, the Turkish authorities mostly did not trouble the North Caucasus Salafi communities, including jihadist operatives.⁵⁵ North Caucasus radicals who wanted to transit to Syria were usually met by IS liaisons in Istanbul, who would put them in flats until they went to Gaziantep and, with the help of special guides, crossed the border. An Istanbul-based North Caucasus journalist explained: "There were reportedly some 50 people here who sustained the transit route".⁵⁶ Another *muhajir* commented: "Arrests in Turkey were usually very targeted; they wait and watch and let everyone show themselves. Once they have enough evidence, they take them and then let them listen to their conversations recorded months ago".⁵⁷

The attitude changed in January 2015, after the IS-inspired suicide bomber in an Istanbul attack was identified as an eighteen-year-old pregnant Dagestani woman. Preventive arrests of North Caucasus Salafis became more frequent. Crisis Group knows of a group of Dagestanis arrested in August 2015 in an Istanbul flat from which some planned to go to Syria to join IS.⁵⁸ Turkish authorities also arrested returnees and recruiters:

They arrested a Dagestani who lived in this neighbourhood with his four wives and never planned to resettle to Syria. So many people went to Daesh (IS), and lots of money was transferred through him. Some people come with money that they donate to IS, sometimes significant funds. ... A family came and brought 1 million roubles [around \$28,500 before rouble devaluation]. For the man in our neighbourhood, this was just profitable business You can easily see it when people have nothing when they first arrive, and then they start driving flashy cars.⁵⁹

On 20-21 October 2015, twelve Chechens and Dagestanis were arrested on suspicion of IS links and plotting an Ankara bombing. Further arrests followed in Antalya prior to a G20 summit.⁶⁰ Four Russian citizens were arrested in southern Turkey the day before an IS suicide bombing in Istanbul on 12 January 2016.⁶¹ According to the Turkish General Staff, 99 Russian citizens were arrested in Turkey in 2015 while trying to join IS, a tenth of all such detainees.⁶²

⁵⁴ Crisis Group interview, Istanbul, December 2015.

⁵⁵ Crisis Group interviews, North Caucasus residents of Istanbul, December 2015.

⁵⁶ Crisis Group interview, North Caucasus journalist, Istanbul, December 2015.

⁵⁷ Crisis Group interview, North Caucasus migrant, Istanbul, December 2015.

⁵⁸ Crisis Group interview, Istanbul, December 2015.

⁵⁹ Crisis Group interview, Dagestani *muhajir*, Istanbul, December 2015.

⁶⁰ "В преддверии G20 в Анталье задержаны 20 предполагаемых членов ИГ" ["Twenty alleged IS members detained on the eve of the G20 in Antalya"], DW.com, 6 November 2015.

⁶¹ Crisis Group open source database on IS arrests in Turkey.

⁶² "Russian Muslims in Turkey", op. cit.

Important CE operatives and ideologues have reportedly also been based in Turkey, including those who organised financial support for the CE and its fighters' transit to and from Syria to join jihadist groups other than IS.⁶³ The most notorious CE ideologue, Movladi Udugov, has reportedly lived discreetly in Istanbul since 2000. Some prominent CE fighters allegedly went there to treat their injuries. The Russian government accused a Turkish NGO, Imkander, of supporting the CE, which it denied, though it organised protests in support of CE operatives and a 2012 conference that saluted Dokku Umarov.⁶⁴

More serious security threats to such operatives come from elsewhere. Abdulvakhid Edilgeriev, a CE representative in Turkey, was shot dead in October 2015 in Istanbul's Kayashehir district, where many North Caucasians live – the eighth Chechen insurgency-related figure assassinated in the country since 2003. Turkish investigators suspect the Russian security services. However, according to a Turkish security-service source, the Russians use proxies, and there are three or four layers between the perpetrators and those who commission killings, so proof is almost impossible.⁶⁵ As of early 2016, only one suspected assassin is on trial.⁶⁶ Both the Edilgeriev assassination and the arrests of Salafis were reportedly followed by a visible new outflow of North Caucasians from Turkey to Syria.⁶⁷

Russia accuses Turkey of having been reluctant to contain not just North Caucasians but also all anti-Assad Sunni radicals before the country itself was hit by terrorist acts. A Facebook self-help group, "On deportation prisons in Turkey", created by the North Caucasus migrants, some of whom went through such facilities, says there were arrests from time to time, but IS supporters were treated with some leniency before Turkey was attacked in 2015. The Turkish authorities denied being lenient, saying:

Usually we don't have concrete evidence so we can only deport, and the legal grounds are actually shaky. We use our discretion, but if the person wants to challenge the decision, they actually could overturn it in many cases The IS-linked people are taught what they need to say to the Turkish officials about where they went in Syria and why. They know how to use the legal loopholes that make it challenging to detain them.⁶⁸

Nonetheless, most North Caucasus jihadists in Iraq and Syria had Turkey on their travel itinerary. "Very few people came to Turkey without any clear reason. Many used it for transit to Syria", a North Caucasus journalist said. "Some were radicalised later, but they could have similarly become radicalised at home. But a huge community is living peacefully, studying and working; everyone who wanted to get a job, did"⁶⁹. A Dagestani *muhajir* echoed: "I think problems with integration in Turkey

⁶³ Gordon M. Hahn, "REPORT: An anatomy of North Caucasus-tied jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq", Gordonhahn.com, 20 October 2015.

⁶⁴ "Assassinations of Rebel-Connected Chechens Continue in Turkey", The Jamestown Foundation, 6 November 2015. "One of the killers shot at the bodies on the ground, then calmly drove away", *Independent*, 8 October 2011. "Murder in Istanbul: Kremlin's hand suspected in shooting of Chechen", *The Guardian*, 10 January 2016.

⁶⁵ Crisis Group interview, Ankara, January 2016.

⁶⁶ "Murder in Istanbul", op. cit. "Assassinations of Rebel-Connected Chechens", op. cit.

⁶⁷ Crisis Group interview, Salafi activists, Dagestan, Istanbul, November-December 2015.

⁶⁸ Crisis Group interview, Turkish official, Ankara, January 2016. Whenever countries, including Russia, provided names, the source added, the suspects were denied access to Turkey.

⁶⁹ Crisis Group interviews, North Caucasus journalist, Istanbul, December 2015.

account for no more than 20 per cent of radicalisation. Most who left for jihad from Turkey were predisposed to radicalism before they came”.⁷⁰

D. *Syria, Iraq and the North Caucasians*

Dagestanis and Chechens are the dominant ethnic groups among Russian jihadists in Syria, but Ingush, Circassian, Karachay and Balkars, Crimean Tatars, Bashkirs and ethnic Russians are also present. The conflict has countless fronts and dozens of localised theatres in which small armed groups fight allied with bigger ones. These groups often fragment and merge; individual fighters migrate from one commander to another. It is hard to trace these changes and evaluate group capacities. Even when part of larger groups, the North Caucasians tend to stay together. Most speak only their vernacular and Russian, feel isolated among Arab speakers, so tend to form their own small groups or subgroups.⁷¹

One of the largest groups in which North Caucasians have fought was the now defunct Jaish-al-Muhajereen al-Ansar (Army of Immigrants and Helpers, JMA), set up and initially led by an ethnic Chechen from Georgia’s Pankisi Gorge, Tarkhan Batirashvili, better known as Umar Shishani.⁷² Its creation was announced by Kavkazcentre, the CE website, which claimed 1,000 were fighting under its banner. It played a notable supporting role in several gains by rebel and jihadist forces, including the August 2013 capture of Mennegh airbase and other battles in and around the northern city of Aleppo.⁷³

In 2013, Umar joined IS, and the JMA split.⁷⁴ Some followed Abu Omar; others stayed with another Chechen, Salakhuddin Shishani, whose group fragmented in June 2015, when he was ousted in a leadership clash and replaced by a Saudi. It eventually became part of al-Qaeda’s al-Nusra front and ceased to exist. Most North Caucasians left with Salakhuddin, who declared JMA’s subgroup, the Caucasus Emirate in al-Sham (Levant), a separate *jamaat*, from which in late 2015 he was again ousted.⁷⁵

North Caucasians fight independently in several other groups, mostly commanded by Chechens, such as Ajnad al-Kavkaz (AK), Ansar al-Sham (AS) and smaller ones like Tarkhan Gaziev’s Jamaat (Chechens), Katibat Ahrar (Syrian Circassian diaspora-dominated group) and Junud al-Sham (JS, declared a terrorist organisation in Russia, among others).⁷⁶ Other Chechens are fighting in various parts of Syria, but their impact is less visible. Independent groups attract those who still believe in the Caucasus regional cause, reject IS cruelty or follow al-Qaeda clerics’ rulings.

⁷⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Istanbul, December 2015.

⁷¹ Crisis Group interview, Joanna Paraszczuk, Chechnya expert, London, November 2015.

⁷² “Omar al-Shishani, Chechen in Syria, rising star in IS leadership”, *The Christian Science Monitor*, 3 July 2014. Shishani was reportedly seriously injured in a recent U.S. strike and later died. “IS Commander Omar Shishani ‘dead’”, BBC News, 14 March 2016.

⁷³ “Chechen commander forms ‘Army of Emigrants,’ integrates Syrian groups”, *The Long War Journal*, 28 March 2013; “State Department adds Chechen, Moroccan-led jihadist groups to terrorist list”, *The Long War Journal*, 24 September 2014; “Syria Special: ‘Foreign Jihadists’ – Who Are Jaish al-Muhajirin al-Ansar?”, EA Worldview, 15 August 2013.

⁷⁴ The date of his *bayat* (allegiance) is disputed. Some sources say May, others a few months later.

⁷⁵ Crisis Group interview, Joanna Paraszczuk, London, December 2015. Her blog, “From Chechnya to Syria”, www.chechensinsyria.com, is the most comprehensive and insightful work on North Caucasus jihadists in Syria. She is an independent journalist and Chechnya expert.

⁷⁶ Ibid. Gordon M. Hahn, “REPORT”, *op. cit.*

The North Caucasus groups who support on the one hand al-Nusra, on the other IS, clash both ideologically and militarily.⁷⁷ According to the veteran jihadist and field commander known as Muslim Shishani, fighters also change from one camp to another: “Given that accurate information is poorly disseminated in the Caucasus, young people have been deceived by the grand-sounding brand of the Caliphate of the Islamic State. But they are already seeing the reality. I can say that a lot of brothers from the Caucasus want to leave IS and come to Latakia”.⁷⁸

An activist in Europe expressed a popular view among fellow diaspora Chechens who support the separatist cause at home:

The beastly cruelty [of IS] has never been part of the Chechen military culture. There are no distinguished Chechen field commanders in IS, except for this so-called Umar Shishani, who is actually an ethnic Georgian, Batirashvili. ... “Shishani” is a well-known brand; that’s why he used it. Most Chechens fight in non-IS groups.⁷⁹

However, experts inside Chechnya insist that Umar Shishani is popular among Chechen radical youth, and IS is in fact attractive for them.

Most foreign fighters in Syria come with no battle experience. North Caucasians, and especially Chechens, are treated with respect as battle-hardened by two decades of fighting Russia. In reality, though, most are new recruits or come from the European diasporas and lack battle experience. Nonetheless, their reputation tends to gain them commands in independent groups or help them move fast up the IS hierarchy, often to second- and third-ranking security positions.

According to a former fighter source, many Chechens in IS work in the *amniyat* (security services) with a counter-intelligence focus. At the same time the Russian FSB and Ramzan Kadyrov’s security services are allegedly trying to infiltrate IS, and the movement recently accused and beheaded Chechens for spying.⁸⁰ A Chechen expert in Europe said, “the IS likely regards anyone from Russia as a potential FSB agent. The time is past when IS was happy to welcome recruits from Russia. Now they need not only numbers, but also some guarantees that the new recruits will not betray them to the Russian authorities”.⁸¹

Reportedly, Chechens in IS maintain solidarity. “Chechen nationalism is strong even within the IS; when Chechens arrest a Chechen, they do not torture him as much as others, and he has greater chances to survive”, an IS defector is said to have claimed.⁸² Chechens are especially prevalent in the IS headquarters city of Raqqa,

⁷⁷ “Письмо Халида Шишани одному из амиров муджахидов Кавказа” [“Khalid Shishani’s letter to one of the Caucasus mujahids’ emirs”], Al-Isnad.com, March 2015.

⁷⁸ Translation, interview with Al Jazeera Turkish, www.chechensinsyria.com, 26 October 2015.

⁷⁹ Crisis Group Skype interview, Chechen activist from Scandinavia, December 2015. In addition to Kists, only very few Muslims from Georgia’s Kvemo Kartli and Ajara are said to have had links with IS. A vast majority of Georgians are Orthodox Christian.

⁸⁰ Crisis Group interview, Istanbul, December 2015. “В ИГИЛ казнили чеченца, сотрудника ФСБ России” [“ISIS executed a Chechen, an agent of the Russian FSB”], Youtube video, 2 December 2015. “Travel to and from the Islamic State”, Caucasian Knot, 15 February 2016.

⁸¹ “Growing Numbers of Russian Converts to Islam Joining Insurgents at Home and Abroad”, the Jamestown Foundation, 17 December 2015.

⁸² Crisis Group interview, North Caucasus activist, Istanbul, December 2015.

where they reportedly opened a Russian grocery store and a Russian-language elementary school, suggesting intention for a longer-term stay.⁸³

Umar Shishani is the senior Chechen in IS. He reportedly led the IS conquest of Iraq's Anbar governorate, which enabled Baghdadi to declare the caliphate, played a lead role in seizing much of eastern Syria from rebels in 2014 and is now believed to head the Military Council and, highly unusual for a non-Iraqi, may even be a Shura Council member.⁸⁴ After many who joined him died in battles, he was nicknamed Abu Myaso (Abu Meat) by his jihadist opponents.⁸⁵

Islam Atabiev (Abu Jihad), a young ethnic Karachay radical from Karachay-Cherkessia and a close Shishani associate, is responsible for his media propaganda and recruitment. Little is known of Atabiev's life in Russia. A yellow press website believed associated with Dagestan's security services claims he was educated in Egypt before returning to Karachay-Cherkessia where he supported insurgents. After a year's imprisonment, he allegedly left for Syria via Turkey and joined Shishani.⁸⁶ He was first involved with recruitment and is said to aggressively push *takfir*, a radical strand in Islam based on accusing other Muslims of apostasy; and his zeal on it was considered extreme even for IS.⁸⁷

Once Umar Shishani became the amir of IS's northern front, he reportedly tried to strengthen his power in the movement's hierarchy. With Abu Jihad, who has been striving to boost his own popularity among Russian-speaking jihadists, he sought to co-opt the insurgency in the North Caucasus. According to an expert, "Umar Shishani is no genius; it is Abu Jihad who has been the main driving force. He has convinced youth that they have created a new power centre in IS. He wants the projection of power and of his prestige".⁸⁸ Their propaganda slogan became "The Caliphate is based on the work of all Muslims in their neighbourhoods".⁸⁹

By the end of 2014, the CE in Russia was already very weakened. Abu Jihad appears to have tried to capitalise by sending messages to groups of fighters there, asking them to clearly identify their position on IS.⁹⁰ After initial months of silence, the re-branding of most North Caucasian fighters was achieved by summer 2015.⁹¹ CE and

⁸³ Charles G. Garis, Samuel Reynolds, "ISIS governance in Syria", Middle East Security Report, ISW, June 2014.

⁸⁴ Gordon M. Hahn, "REPORT", op. cit. Richard Barrett, "The Islamic State", <http://soufangroup.com>, November 2014. Crisis Group Middle East Report N°155, *Rigged Cars and Barrel Bombs: Aleppo and the State of the Syrian War*, 9 September 2014, p.11. Abu Abdurakhman Shishani, Abu Omar's brother, is reportedly the amir of the security service department for Russian speakers. Sheifulla Islam Shishani is the amir of one of the towns in Iraq. "Travel to and From the Islamic State", op. cit.

⁸⁵ Crisis Group interview, Joanna Paraszczuk, London, December 2015.

⁸⁶ "Абу Джихад – бренд клуба сволочей" ["Abu Jihad – a brand name of the bastards' club"], Kavkazpress, 28 November 2014.

⁸⁷ Crisis Group interview, expert, Moscow, December 2015. According to some sources, the issue of *takfir* is one of the most politicised in IS. Reportedly, a growing number of individuals criticise IS for insufficient enforcement of Islamic law on the territory it controls and being too lenient to locals, for violating Sharia in its policies and using repressive methods forbidden in Islam. Some advocate more aggressive *takfir* toward those who violate Sharia and even *takfir* toward IS itself, a criticism for which they can reportedly be arrested and even executed. Crisis Group interviews, experts, Moscow, December 2015; "Travel to and From the Islamic State", op. cit.

⁸⁸ Crisis Group interview, Joanna Paraszczuk, London, December 2015.

⁸⁹ Crisis Group monitoring of IS video propaganda on social media.

⁹⁰ Ibid; Crisis Group interview, Joanna Paraszczuk, London, December 2015.

⁹¹ Crisis Group monitoring of IS video propaganda and the North Caucasus insurgency.

Caucasus fighters in Syria had always had strong connections, but after the insurgency's incorporation into IS, they became even closer. A new IS leader in Dagestan said, "the Caliphate stands firmly behind our shoulders". Crisis Group observations confirm that Dagestani fighters in IS are actively involved in local developments in their home republic.⁹²

⁹² For example, two days after the conflict around the Al-Nadiriya (Kotrova) Mosque in Makhachkala, they called for the congregation to merge into the crowd, wait for the right moment and strike (see below). A similar statement was issued during protests over closure of a Salafi mosque in Khasavyurt, 1 February 2016. For more on the conflict around the Al-Nadiriya Mosque, see "Эксперты заявили об обострении ситуации в Дагестане в связи с акциями дальнбойщиков и конфликтами вокруг мечетей салафитов" ["Experts told about aggravation of the situation in Dagestan in connection with the protests of truck drivers and conflicts around the Salafi mosques"], *Caucasian Knot*, 28 November 2015. Irina Gordienko, "В центре Махачкалы без объяснения причин закрыли крупную мечеть" ["In the center of Makhachkala a big mosque has been closed without explaining reasons"], *Novaya Gazeta*, 5 December 2015.

III. Russian State Security Responses

The Russian Federation's prosecutor general announced in November 2015 that 650 criminal cases had been opened on participation of Russian citizens in illegal armed formations abroad. According to the FSB head, they concern 1,000 citizens. Additionally, 770 insurgents and their accomplices were arrested and 156 fighters killed in the North Caucasus in 2015, including twenty of the 26 leaders of groups which had sworn allegiance to IS.⁹³ More than 150 returnees from Syria and Iraq were sentenced to prison.⁹⁴ Nonetheless, the outflow of violent jihadists continues, and, experts say, the strongest insurgency leaders who swore loyalty to IS are still alive.⁹⁵

A. *Controlling the Outflow: Before and After the Sochi Olympics*

Many in the North Caucasus believe the security services opened the border for radicals to leave before the 2014 Sochi Olympics, even encouraging them toward Syria. A Salafi activist insisted: "This is 100 per cent: they have turned the green light on and opened the road; there are lots of indications".⁹⁶ A *Novaya Gazeta* investigation supports this, though local lawyers are doubtful: "I totally disagree. On the contrary, they restricted people's movement before the Games. ... They could have closed eyes on some of the cases or just missed some of them due to neglect, but I don't think this was a conscious policy".⁹⁷ A source in security structures in the North Caucasus, however, said bluntly:

Of course, we did. We opened borders, helped them all out and closed the border behind them by criminalising this type of fighting. If they want to return now, we are waiting for them at the borders. Everyone's happy: they are dying on the path of Allah, and we have no terrorist acts here and are now bombing them in Latakia and Idlib. State policy has to be pragmatic; this was very effective.⁹⁸

⁹³ TASS, 15 December 2015, *op. cit.*

⁹⁴ "В РФ осуждены более 150 вернувшихся из Сирии боевиков" ["Over 150 insurgents-returnees from Syria have been sentenced in Russia"], Interfax, 2 December 2015.

⁹⁵ Such as Ruslan Aselderov, Aslan Abdullaev, Aslan Buytukaev and Zalim Shebzukhov. "Эксперты заявили о сохранении костяка ИГ на Северном Кавказе" ["Experts said IS has preserved its core in the North Caucasus"], *Caucasian Knot*, 15 December 2015.

⁹⁶ Crisis Group interview, Salafi activist, Makhachkala, December 2015.

⁹⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Sapiyat Magomedova, lawyer, Dagestan, Rustam Matsev, lawyer, Kabardino-Balkaria, November-December 2015; "Халифат? Приманка для дураков!" ["The Caliphate? A bait for fools!"], *Novaya Gazeta*, 29 July 2015; "Бездействие подчас хуже ошибок" ["Inaction is sometimes worse than mistakes"], *Rosbalt*, 27 November 2015.

⁹⁸ Crisis group interview, November 2015. Russia launched military operations in Syria on 30 September 2015, after the Federal Assembly authorised President Putin to use force. According to Putin, "the only true way to fight international terrorism ... is to pre-empt, to fight and eliminate fighters and terrorists on the territories already captured by them without waiting until they come to our home. ... It is widely known that in ... such terrorist organisations as the so-called Islamic state ... are thousands with origins in European states, Russia and post-Soviet countries. You don't need to be an expert on these issues to understand: if they achieve success in Syria, ... they will come also to Russia". "Путин: ислам не имеет ничего общего с ИГИЛ" ["Putin: Islam has nothing to do with ISIS"], Youtube.com video, 30 September 2015. In January 2016, Muslim Shishani's jihadist group in Latakia reported heavy losses inflicted by the Russian air force and Syrian government troops. Joanna Paraszczuk, "Muslim Shishani makes video address about the situation in Latakia", *www.chechensinsyria.com*, 12 January 2016.

Chechen security services reportedly had disagreements with FSB leniency for the departing first wave. According to an expert, “this issue is under Kadyrov’s personal control; he very quickly realised that Chechen jihadists in Syria are a serious threat. After Umar Shishani threatened him and his inner circle, he took it as a personal matter”.⁹⁹ Kadyrov, who has many political and blood enemies, understands, a Chechen journalist explained, “that any Chechen who fights anywhere in the world but who does not fight for him is his personal threat and danger, because the moment an opportunity arises, this Chechen will fight against him. Any armed Chechen is a threat for his regime”.¹⁰⁰

The federal security policy in the North Caucasus changed in the second half of 2014 to one that tries to strictly control and prevent the flow of jihadists to the Middle East. Over 100 citizens, including women, suspected of heading to Syria were stopped at the borders in 2015.¹⁰¹ Sometimes, they were under observation even before the border; in other instances, they aroused suspicions there. Aminat I., a Dagestan resident, said she was going to Turkey to buy goods for her shop but was taken off the plane and her computer, phone, \$2,000 and personal belongings confiscated. The security services knew her sister was in Syria and concluded her luggage, which contained 50 kg of food products and eleven pairs of male socks, was suspicious. She said she was asked to cooperate by establishing contacts with Dagestanis in Syria and reporting on them in exchange for not having criminal charges brought against her.¹⁰²

At the end of October 2015, Chechen authorities said they detained in a Moscow apartment seventeen to twenty young men preparing to join IS whom, Ramzan Kadyrov declared, Western intelligence services had recruited. In September, five youths aged twenty to 25 and two women, one pregnant, from Chechnya were detained at the border trying to join IS. The brother of one reportedly had been in Syria for some time and invited them; the parents informed the security services. A criminal case has been initiated, and they may face five to ten years in prison.¹⁰³ The police, sources say, now consider every jihadist who reaches Syria a local officer’s failure.¹⁰⁴ “Our police officer told me he was allocated four people he was ‘responsible for’, so he would monitor us”, a Salafi woman said.¹⁰⁵ “The district officer told one of my friends: ‘I will help you to rent a flat, just move away from my district’”, another source said.¹⁰⁶

⁹⁹ Crisis Group Skype interview, Elena Milashina, *Novaya Gazeta*, January 2016.

¹⁰⁰ Crisis Group Skype interview, Chechen journalist, January 2016.

¹⁰¹ TASS, 15 December 2015, op. cit.

¹⁰² Memorial human rights centre information, Makhachkala, Crisis Group interview, November 2015.

¹⁰³ “Власти Чечни заявили о задержании группы потенциальных боевиков ИГИЛ” [“Chechen authorities reported detention of potential IS insurgents”], *Caucasian Knot*, 31 October 2015. “Шесть жителей Чечни арестованы по подозрению в попытке уехать на войну в Сирию” [“Six residents of Chechnya arrested on suspicion of trying to go to war in Syria”], *Caucasian Knot*, 1 September 2015.

¹⁰⁴ Crisis Group interview, Sapiyat Magomedova, lawyer, Makhachkala, November 2015.

¹⁰⁵ Crisis Group Skype interview, Salafi believer from Izberbash, Dagestan, December 2015.

¹⁰⁶ Crisis Group interview, Salafi activist, Makhachkala, November 2015.

On 1 August 2015, the Public Chamber of the Russian Federation launched a hotline for countering IS recruitment. It aims, inter alia, to assist those whose relatives are in Syria or plan to go there. It sends alerts from relatives to security services to stop recruits from leaving the country.¹⁰⁷

Security services across the region also target recruiters and those who raise money for jihadists. Some experts believe the IS recruitment network in Russia is a stable structure with cells in the North Caucasus, Volga region, Siberia and the Russian Far East.¹⁰⁸ 270 cases have been opened to investigate alleged financing of terrorism; 40 recruiters are said to have been arrested and sentenced in Dagestan alone.¹⁰⁹ Alleged recruiters have been arrested for reportedly trying to attract young people from respected families in Chechnya, but also Moscow, Saint Petersburg, Yekaterinburg and the Stavropol and Krasnodar Krays.¹¹⁰ A medical student in Moscow is facing fourteen years in jail for posting the IS flag on social networks.¹¹¹

The credibility of recruitment charges is hard to establish. A source in the Dagestan security services explained how they identify recruiters: “A person posts or reposts some propaganda on social networks; a couple of arrested suspects testify he tried to convince them to join, and you have your suspect!”¹¹² Given the prevalence of torture, suspects’ testimony often allows reasonable doubt as to whether the accused is a recruiter or just shares radical ideology. The security services’ focus on quantitative results as the main criterion for performance evaluation encourages police to inflate their successes.¹¹³ Moreover, most recruiters are reportedly based outside Russia, in Europe or Turkey, so unreachable.¹¹⁴

¹⁰⁷ “Учетный гражданин. Будни войны с исламским терроризмом в России” [“A registered citizen. Everyday war against Islamic terrorism in Russia”], *Kommersant*, 7 December 2015.

¹⁰⁸ “Шестеро вербовщиков ИГИЛ на Ставрополье получили по 5-7 лет колонии” [“Six ISIS recruiters in Stavropol region sentenced to 5-7 years in prison”], *Rosbalt*, 1 December 2015.

¹⁰⁹ TASS, 15 December 2015, op. cit. Crisis Group interview, security official, Makhachkala, November 2015.

¹¹⁰ “Кадиров: В Чечне задержаны вербовщики” [“Kadyrov: ISIS recruiters detained in Chechnya”], *TopNews*, 2 October 2015; “В Краснодарском крае арестован вербовщик ИГ, планировавший теракт”. [“An ISIS recruiter who had planned an attack was arrested in the Krasnodar Krai”], *EurAsiaDaily*, 19 October 2015; “ФСБ задержала предполагаемого вербовщика ИГИЛ в Санкт-Петербурге” [“FSB has detained an alleged ISIS recruiter in Saint-Petersburg”], *Lifefews*, 10 June 2015; “В Екатеринбургe вербовщик ИГИЛ, заманивавший уральцев в Сирию, получил больше трех лет” [“The ISIS recruiter who had been recruiting the Ural region’s residents for Syria sentenced to over three years in prison”], *Rosbalt*, 8 December 2015; “Six ISIS recruiters sentenced”, op. cit.; “Семь жителей Чечни подозреваются в вербовке людей для ‘Исламского государства’” [“Seven Chechen residents are suspected of recruiting people for the Islamic State”], *Caucasian Knot*, 6 September 2015; “В Подмосковье задержаны вербовщики ИГИЛ” [“ISIS recruiters detained in the Moscow region”], *Youtube.com*, 28 October 2015; “Адвокаты Умаханова обжаловали приговор по делу о вербовке в ИГ” [“Umakhanov’s lawyers appealed the court’s verdict in IS recruitment case”], *Caucasian Knot*, 9 December 2015.

¹¹¹ “Московской студентке грозит 14 лет за размещение в Сети флага ИГИЛ” [“Moscow student is facing 14 years for posting ISIS flag on the net”], *Izvestiya*, 24 February 2016.

¹¹² Crisis Group interview, Dagestan, November 2015.

¹¹³ For more on system of evaluation of police performance and related human rights problems, see Crisis Group Report, *The Challenges of Integration (III)*, op. cit., pp. 34-37.

¹¹⁴ “Боевик из Сирии Саид Мажаев вернулся домой в Чечню” [“An insurgent from Syria said Mazhaev returned home to Chechnya”], video available on *Youtube.com*, 7 March 2015. Crisis Group Skype interview, Elena Milashina, *Novaya Gazeta*, January 2016.

B. *Clamping Down on Salafi Activism and Mosques*

The security threat associated with the North Caucasus insurgency's radicalisation and the emergence of IS cells throughout Russia is acute and requires a calibrated, sophisticated response. Since the second half of 2014, the authorities have successfully reduced the outflow and contained recruitment and potential terrorist cells. But heavy-handed methods and grave human rights violations, including enforced disappearances, summary executions and widespread application of torture, especially in Dagestan and Chechnya, continue to radicalise parts of Salafi communities and feed jihadism.

For over a decade, a key control method across the region has been *профучет* (*profuchet*, preventive registration of extremists). Those suspected of adherence to fundamentalist strands of Islam are put on special lists, with details of personal lives, habits and family nicknames.¹¹⁵ After incidents, such as clashes between security and insurgents or terrorist acts, local police detain them; interrogations reportedly often involve violent or degrading methods. Many have gone on the lists due to their appearance, a visit to the wrong mosque, contact with other Salafis or renting a flat or giving a ride to suspicious persons.¹¹⁶

While the state must be able to trace potential terrorists, the legal basis and effectiveness of the preventive register policy has been seriously questioned. According to a copy of his registration card shown to Crisis Group by a Dagestan Salafi, the database he was put on is entitled "the prevention register under the category 'Wahhabi'". Wahhabism is not forbidden in the Russian Federation, whose constitution bans prosecution based on religion; it is thus illegal to discriminate between people on the basis of their beliefs. Dagestan, however, has a republic law banning "Wahhabism and other forms of extremism", adopted by its Peoples' Assembly in 1999; Dagestani courts have recently cited this law in decisions upholding preventive registration.¹¹⁷ Human rights activists have repeatedly argued that the law contradicts the federal constitution. For a time after 2010, the practice appeared to be no longer widely applied, but its recent return to favour raises serious concerns.

Since the second half of 2014, numbers on the registers have increased significantly, especially in Dagestan where attempts to trace potential trouble-makers have been most aggressive. 15,000 people are reportedly listed there, including widows, wives and sisters of insurgents, their children and sometimes parents.¹¹⁸ Being on these lists has serious implications: you will be stopped at traffic checkpoints, interrogated and often brought to a police station, to be interrogated again, fingerprinted, photographed and held for a few hours, with blood and saliva tests sometimes also done. If you try to travel outside the region, you can be kept off a plane. A human rights lawyer said:

¹¹⁵ Crisis Group Report, *The Challenges of Integration (II)*, op. cit.

¹¹⁶ Oleg Orlov, Ekaterina Sokirianskaia, "Magomedov's new deal?", op. cit.

¹¹⁷ "Решение Кизилюртовского районного суда Республики Дагестанот 10 июня 2015 г. по делу № 2-209/2015" ["Decision of Dagestan's Kizilyurt District Court, 10 June 2015, on case N° 2-209/2015"], <http://sudact.ru>. The courts refer to the register as for "adherents of non-traditional Islam", a term with no legal definition. The law has often been questioned as contradicting the federation constitution but had never been disputed in court until recently, as it was not being applied.

¹¹⁸ "Прокуратура Дагестана о постановке на учёт..." (выступление в ДГИНХ 1 марта 2016 г.) [Prosecutor's office of Dagestan on registration, 1 March 2016, Chernovik].

95 per cent of those who are on the lists can't travel outside the region Security services plant weapons, ammunition or drugs on them, detain them, subject them to torture. I think they have set themselves the goal to fully eradicate the very notion of Wahhabism.¹¹⁹

People are usually unaware of being on these lists until their first detention.¹²⁰ Many moderate individuals have recently found themselves registered in Dagestan, including a former member of the Public Chamber and the leader of the republic's branch of the democratic opposition Yabloko party.¹²¹ Some police have been surprised by the numbers of recent additions; they lack the manpower and time to bring all registered individuals to the station and follow all prescribed procedures.¹²² Once on the list it is hard to be taken off, though security services sometimes acknowledge a mistake.

Some officials informally acknowledge that "regretfully, this practice only pushes people into the forests and to resistance".¹²³ However, there are also instances when it has helped save lives, according to an account shared with Crisis Group: "My nephew went to Syria with five other youths, all from the same class in one of the Makhachkala schools. Security services knew they shared these ideals. Four were on the lists, and they were detained at the airport in Mineralye Vody. Two, including my nephew, were not registered and today are in Syria".¹²⁴

A related practice of pushing the more radical or charismatic Salafi preachers out of the legal space pre-dates the Olympics in Dagestan. In 2015, a number of imams and teachers of Arabic and Quran were arrested on charges of illegally holding weapons; relatives and supporters believe the weapons were planted on them.¹²⁵ Two of the imams went over to IS, and in one case sources in the security services confirmed that the weapon was planted and the imam given "a green light" to resettle.¹²⁶ An expert called this: "a general policy, it's hard to say who initiated it – local or federal security services. ... I would call these preachers ... quite radical, but not extremist. They are being pressured because of fears and to be on the safe side. Also there is a mistaken view that if you push them out, everything will be quiet and happy".¹²⁷

¹¹⁹ Crisis Group interview, Sapiyat Magomedova, human rights lawyer, Makhachkala, November 2015.

¹²⁰ Crisis Group interviews, people on the lists, Makhachkala, November 2015.

¹²¹ Crisis Group interview, Salafi leader; "Яблоко" призвало главу МВД снять Бабаева с учета в полиции" ["Yabloko urged the Interior Minister to remove Babayev from the police register"], Caucasian Knot, 10 March 2015.

¹²² "Дагестан: полицейские жалуются на систему постановки на профучет" ["Dagestan: Policemen complain about the system of preventive registers"], Memorial, 30 October 2015.

¹²³ Crisis Group interview, Dagestani official, Makhachkala, November 2015.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Kurban Askandarov of Kotrova mosque, "Мать заместителя имама мечети в Махачкале обратилась за помощью к правозащитникам" ["Mother of the deputy Imam of a mosque in Makhachkala appealed for help to human rights activists"], Caucasian Knot, 28 May 2015; Isa Koytemirov, Kayakent, "Имам села Каякент задержан в Дагестане" ["The Imam of Kayakent village detained in Dagestan"], Caucasian Knot, 25 October 2015; Kamil Isaev, Makhachkala, "В Дагестане арестован очередной исламский проповедник" ["Another Islamic preacher arrested in Dagestan"], Infochechen.com, 1 September 2015.

¹²⁶ Crisis Group interview, security official, Makhachkala, November 2015.

¹²⁷ "Ахмет Ярлыкапов: В Дагестане существует общая логика вытеснения радикальных проповедников". "Как правило, эти люди, к сожалению, оказываются с 'Исламским государством'" ["Akhmet Yarlykapov: In Dagestan there is a general logic of ousting radical preachers". "As a rule, these people, unfortunately, find themselves with the Islamic State"], Memo.ru, 1 September 2015.

Raids on Salafi mosques and mass arrests of associated believers have become part of a systematic policy aimed at closing or fully controlling the mosques. In November and December 2015, 80-100 people were reportedly detained in a mosque in Shamkhal village (11 December); 40-50 in the Al-Nadiriya Mosque in Makhachkala (20 November); and 40 in Bujnaks (13 November). All were registered as extremists.¹²⁸ In summer 2015, similar raids took place throughout Dagestan.

The most worrying incident was in the night of 20 November, when Sufi leaders, accompanied by aggressive, muscular believers and with security service-support, seized the Al-Nadiriya Mosque, the symbol of Dagestani Salafism for a decade. “It started a few months ago”, a leader of the mosque said. “They started to detain people by groups right after prayers. This day as well they arrested several bus-loads of men, so those who usually come to pray stayed at home to avoid problems, and there were only 50-60 believers at the mosque that night”.¹²⁹ The Sufi activists led by the imam of Makhachkala’s central mosque, Magomedrasul Saaduev, one of the few Sufis generally respected in the Salafi community, came in and installed a Sufi imam. “I shouted ‘I am against!’”, a witness recalled. “You know very well that you are not the congregation of this mosque – wouldn’t it be better if the congregation itself elected the new imam? Five to seven people immediately attacked me, knocked me down, pulled me back and forth and tried to beat me”, he added.¹³⁰

The next morning Crisis Group observed angry young men around the Al-Nadiriya Mosque area, apparently looking for ways to channel their resentment. Armoured vehicles, police cars and special task force personnel in masks blocked the area. Police started shooting in the air. “*Akhi* [brother], Russians are suppressing us!”, a young man in the crowd was telling the others. At the same time, mosque leaders tried to negotiate with the republic’s Muftiyat. Five days later, Saaduev told a press conference the Muftiyat was ready to find a new imam acceptable to all, after consultations with the mosque’s leadership. In a couple of days, he was proclaimed the imam of Al-Nadiriya Mosque, without consultation.¹³¹ Its Salafi leadership and congregation refused to accept him and said they would not be responsible for possible escalation. North Caucasus fighters in IS issued a statement mocking the moderate leaders for seeking compromise and called on angry youths to break up the crowd and attack at the right moment, as their “brothers in Paris” had done.¹³²

Fearing an escalation, Saaduev stepped down on 30 November, and the security services closed the mosque, citing suspicions a bomb was in it. A Salafi activist said, “many people feel extremely indignant, insulted. The radical ones think it’s now time to take up arms; others say that we should be patient”.¹³³

¹²⁸ “Эксперты поставили под сомнение эффективность борьбы с терроризмом с помощью задержаний в мечетях” [“Experts questioned the effectiveness of fight against terrorism by arrests in mosques”]; “Жители Буйнакска сообщили о массовом задержании прихожан мечети” [“Buynaksk residents told about the mass detention of mosque parishioners”], *Caucasian Knot*, 21 November 2015, 14 November 2015.

¹²⁹ Crisis Group interview, Makhachkala, November 2015. The Al-Nadiriya Mosque is also known as the Kotrova Mosque, after the name of the street in which it is located.

¹³⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Ziyautdin Uvaisov, Salafi believer, Makhachkala, November 2015.

¹³¹ Crisis Group observations, Makhachkala, November 2015.

¹³² Statement disseminated in social media.

¹³³ Crisis Group interview, Salafi activist, Makhachkala, November 2015.

While the Al-Nadiriya Mosque incident has had a vocal resonance in the society, some other Salafi mosques were taken over more quietly. An activist from the Lenin-kent suburb of Makhachkala told Crisis Group that local police threatened to close their mosque, which was frequented by the Salafis, unless the imam was replaced. Police put pressure on him, and the imam, widely considered a moderate, stepped down.¹³⁴ Similar pressure was exerted on the imam of the Makhachkala mosque in Vengerskikh Boytsov Street, which has a more united congregation. In other mosques, congregations resisted attempts to close or replace imams. When the Severnaya Mosque was closed in Khasavyurt, over 5,000 Salafis took to the streets until it was reopened, and an angry crowd also went into the streets in Derbent when the imam of its “Airport Mosque” was detained.¹³⁵ In recent months, Salafi mosques in Novy Kurush and Shamkhal and small prayer houses in Ordzhonikidze Street and the so-called Palmira in Makhachkala were also closed.¹³⁶

The common belief that radicalisation happens in certain mosques is not empirically supported.¹³⁷ Radicalisation usually happens not in official institutions such as mosques, universities and gymnasiums, but rather through informal youth networks that emerge among friends and peers. Radical youths organise around social networks and follow the general jihadist call, rather than fall victim to systematic, consistent personalised recruitment. Young people who have left for insurgency from all around Dagestan have attended various mosques, including the Central Mosque in Makhachkala, which has the best reputation for being in line with official Islam.

Congregations of Salafi mosques are often fluid, their followers migrating from one to another. A law-enforcement source confirmed that such mosques were “packed with bugs and agents”, so it was easy to control the congregations.¹³⁸ Forced closures anger Salafi communities, empower radicals, decrease security-service monitoring capacity and weaken moderate forces among both Salafis and Sufis.

Policy toward Salafis is traditionally harshest in Chechnya, where fundamentalist Salafism, pejoratively called “Wahhabism”, is banned. Authorities have repeatedly and openly declared that Wahhabis would not be allowed to live in Chechnya and should be killed. Traditional Sufi Islam is declared the true path and state ideology.¹³⁹ Until recently the security services did not keep formal Salafi registration lists, but every municipality closely monitors its young people.¹⁴⁰ In mid-February, however, the press service of the Chechen parliament announced mandatory “moral-spiritual passportisation” of all Chechens aged fourteen to 35. Such “passports”

¹³⁴ Crisis Group interview, Gadzhikishi Vamatov, Makhachkala, November 2015.

¹³⁵ “Несколько тысяч прихожан закрытой вчера в Хасавюрте мечети двигаются маршем протеста в сторону администрации города.” [“Several thousand parishioners of the closed mosque in Khasavyurt the day before march toward the city administration”], *Chernovik*, 1 February 2016. “Жители Дербента сообщили о задержании имама салафитской мечети” [Residents of Derbent reported the detention of imam of the Salafi mosque], *Caucasian Knot*, 9 February 2016.

¹³⁶ “Прихожане мечети в Махачкале сообщили о массовой постановке на учет в полиции.” [“Frequenters of the mosque in Makhachkala told about a mass registration by the police”], *Caucasian Knot*, 4 October 2015.

¹³⁷ “95% of foreign fighters who join ISIS are recruited by friends and family and radicalisation ‘rarely occurs in mosques’, claims an Oxford University terrorism expert”, *Daily Mail*, 25 November 2015.

¹³⁸ Crisis Group interview, source in law-enforcement structures, November 2015.

¹³⁹ Crisis Group Europe Report N°236, *Chechnya: the Inner Abroad?*, 30 June 2015.

¹⁴⁰ Especially in rural areas, families must report when their young men are leaving the republic for an extended period (work, studies, etc).

would inter alia register a young person's ethnicity, clan and Islamic sect and should have the signature of the father or clan leader, who should agree in turn to share responsibility for the young person's behaviour. This outraged independent federal media, and Kadyrov denied the plan.

However, according to Crisis Group sources, the term "passport" was replaced by "questionnaire", and the mandatory registration was launched on 25 February. According to a Crisis Group source, the imam of his village mosque announced that "the Padishah" (a term the Chechen elite use to refer to Ramzan Kadyrov) had given three days to complete the process, and all fathers had to bring offspring aged fourteen to 35 to the local school to fill out and sign the form.¹⁴¹

The interior ministry conducts routine campaigns against hijabs, which must cover the chin, and beards without moustaches – visual symbols of Salafi followers.¹⁴² At the end of October 2015, suspected Salafis were detained en masse, and at year's end the security services reportedly again carried out detentions throughout the republic, with many disappearances.¹⁴³ Since March 2014, imams of mosques in Grozny have been obliged to control the appearance of their congregation members and submit weekly reports about their progress in combatting fundamentalism.¹⁴⁴ There are no Salafi mosques or open Salafi activities in Chechnya.

Kadyrov urges all Muslim countries to fight IS, which he calls the "Iblis State" (State of Satan), tries to energise his supporters against it and repeatedly has offered to send his military to Syria.¹⁴⁵ In February 2016, the federal TV channel Rossiya1 reported Chechen forces were fighting in Syria.¹⁴⁶ Kadyrov proposes that jihadists in Syria should lose citizenship and not be allowed back.¹⁴⁷ Ingushetia's leader, Yunus-Bek Yevkurov, supported this as a deterrent, though his policy toward Salafis and returning insurgents is the region's most moderate: Ingushetia does not harass Salafis and reportedly keeps lists only of those who go to Syria¹⁴⁸. In June 2015, its mufti, Issa Khamkhoev, and supporters tried to seize a village mosque in Nasir-Kort, led by an influential Salafi imam, Khamzat Chumakov. The authorities intervened, the mosque stayed independent and Yevkurov advised the republic's religious leaders to consider electing a new mufti.¹⁴⁹ Lists exist in Kabardino-Balkaria, but those on them do not complain of being pressured or mistreated.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴¹ Crisis Group Skype interviews, February 2016. "В Чечне ввели 'духовно-нравственный паспорт'" ["Moral-spiritual passport was introduced in Chechnya"], 18 February 2016.

¹⁴² "Ношение бороды" ["The wearing of a beard"], Heart of Chechnya. <http://serdce-chechni.ru>.

¹⁴³ "В конце прошлого года в Чечне зафиксированы многочисленные похищения" ["Numerous abductions recorded in Chechnya in the end of last year"], Memorial, 14 January 2016.

¹⁴⁴ "Каждый Грозного обязал имамов следить за внешним видом прихожан мечетей" ["Qadi of Grozny ordered imams to look after the appearance of parishioners of mosques"], Caucasian Knot, 26 March 2014.

¹⁴⁵ "Кадиров просит Путина разрешить чеченцам воевать в Сирии", Russia Today, 2 October 2015.

¹⁴⁶ "Кадиров рассказал о чеченском спецназе в Сирии" ["Kadyrov spoke of Chechen spetsnaz [special forces] in Syria"], *Novaya Gazeta*, 8 February 2016.

¹⁴⁷ "Рамзан Кадиров предложил лишать гражданства воюющих за ИГ" ["Ramzan Kadyrov proposed that IS fighters should be deprived of citizenship"], Russia Today, 22 July 2015.

¹⁴⁸ Crisis Group Skype and email interviews, Batyr Akhilogov, Ingush human rights lawyer, Tamirlan Akiev, head of Memorial human rights centre in Ingushetia, December 2015.

¹⁴⁹ "Хамзат Чумаков: 'между Чечней и Ингушетией'" ["Khamzat Chumakov: between Chechnya and Ingushetia"], Kavpolit, 29 December 2015.

¹⁵⁰ Crisis Group Skype interviews, Ibrahim Sulytsov, Memorial human rights centre; Eva Chanieva, human rights lawyer, both Kabardino-Balkaria, December 2015.

IV. Why IS?

Alongside the crackdown on local militancy and Salafi *dawa* (religious mission), another set of factors that has driven the ideological shift in the North Caucasus insurgency from regional to global is related to the nature of IS's appeal to local radicals. Disentangling the complex motivations is a prerequisite for identifying de-radicalisation strategies and policies for reducing the social tensions that led to emergence of radical movements. This section maps the drivers of local radicals to IS and is based on interviews with North Caucasus Salafis, relatives of fighters, officials and experts, as well as Crisis Group observations.

The security services have crushed the insurgency in the North Caucasus, but the Russian government has not addressed the grievances that fuelled it, though some visible socio-economic development has been achieved, and in some republics steps have been taken to curb corruption.¹⁵¹ IS propagandists effectively instrumentalise the anger and frustrations of Sunni Muslims, but not all IS recruits are disadvantaged, persecuted or underprivileged: social status and a penchant for radicalism do not correlate. Many people live in difficult conditions, but only a handful of them radicalise and join IS. In parallel to religious considerations, some see IS as a chance to start a new life, others as an alluring project that can provide opportunities for realising ambitions.

A. A Religious Utopia

Most Salafi respondents insist the main reasons for joining IS are religious. Every fundamentalist Sunni Muslim says he or she wants to live in an Islamic state. The eschatological (end-of-the-world) *hadiths* about Sham call Muslims to fight before that event. Eschatological expectations have always been widespread in the North Caucasus, mainly in superstition and legend form and mostly among the elderly. However, youths have recently become susceptible, projecting their anxieties and tensions onto resettling in the “holy lands of Sham” (the Levant).¹⁵²

IS is believed to have designated the territory it controls a caliphate to delegitimise the rulings of al-Qaeda's leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, and for propaganda purposes. A caliphate is the only type of Islamic statehood that has legal implications for the entire *ummah* (Islamic community). If declared pursuant to legitimate Sharia procedures, all Muslims have the obligation to recognise its ruler and swear loyalty; moreover, its Sharia rulings supersede those of other scholars and institutions in the entire *ummah*.¹⁵³

Radicals convince youth that making *hijra* to the IS caliphate or fighting for it is the individual obligation (*fardh 'ajn*) of each Muslim. Those who abstain, they say, fail their obligations to Allah.¹⁵⁴ Before Russia criminalised participation in armed

¹⁵¹ See Crisis Group Europe Report N°237, *The North Caucasus: The Challenges of Integration (IV): Economic and Social Imperatives*, 7 July 2015.

¹⁵² Akhmet Yarlykarov, “Ахыр Замана и Хиджра: Мусульманская молодежь в эсхатологических ожиданиях” [“Akhyr Zamana and Hijrah: Muslim youth in eschatological expectations”], lecture, European University in Saint Petersburg.

¹⁵³ Crisis Group interview, expert, Makhachkala, November 2015.

¹⁵⁴ There are two types of religious obligations of Muslims – *fardh 'ajn* and *fardh kifaya*. The first is a compulsory individual duty that every Muslim must perform, like praying, fasting, pilgrimage etc. The second is a collective duty imposed on the whole community of believers, and it is sufficient if

groups abroad, a number of young men, influenced by the propaganda, would leave for Syria for three or four months “to fulfil their religious obligation” and came back.¹⁵⁵

Another religious argument is linked to *zulm* (subjugation and suffering of the oppressed), which obliges Muslims to help the Syrian people.¹⁵⁶ “The photos of torn or mutilated bodies of children have a huge psychological effect on youth”, a North Caucasus expert explained. The sectarian Sunni-Shia divide of the war contributes to indignation. Sunni solidarity reportedly drew even some Dagestani Sufis into Syria at the war’s beginning. The official Muftiyat, which has a strong influence over Sufis, quickly stopped this.¹⁵⁷

IS also attracts with its utopian appeal. The caliphate is a dream, a longed for, highly romanticised vision of the revival of a multi-ethnic Islamic entity that will eventually liberate and restore the dignity and power of Muslims living in places where they have experienced subjugation. It promises new, happy lives, including for those who wish to create families or escape certain circumstances. This resonates, for example, in Chechnya, where many want to find alternatives to a highly repressive regime. According to a *Novaya Gazeta* expert:

The motivation is to run somewhere far away from Chechnya. The spring of repression has been pressed too hard; you can’t press any further. If you are not related to the ruling clan, you can’t have a dignified life. They go into the Caliphate to start a new life. It’s another channel of exit, and they are trying to convince themselves that it’s a better alternative.¹⁵⁸

A Chechen journalist and activist said such escapism is a way to restore injured dignity and find a new meaning in life:

Chechens, and especially men, need to live with a feeling that they are in the position to make their own decisions to be their own bosses. But these days the opportunities for life in dignity are dramatically shrinking. One can find a job, but [must] be ready to close eyes on injustices and do everything his boss demands Turning to religion gives them a sense they are making their own decisions When joining this war many think they are saving their religion; this liberates them and gives them a sense of great mission.¹⁵⁹

Escapism is a strong motivation also in Dagestan’s less repressive context: “People are looking for happiness, and IS will find a spouse for you; even sexual satisfaction alone makes people happier, especially women from traditional societies, widows, women who divorced or escaped from the husbands they don’t love”, an Istanbul-based Salafi explained.¹⁶⁰ Crisis Group has documented the case of a married woman who escaped with her children to IS and remarried, having declared her first hus-

some members fulfil it, for example, funeral prayers. Military jihad is considered *fardh kifaya* in certain circumstances and *fardh ‘ajn* in some others.

¹⁵⁵ Crisis Group interview, relatives of fighter in Syria, Salafi activists, Khasavyurt, Khasavyurt region, Dagestan, November 2015.

¹⁵⁶ *Zulm* (Arabic) are cruel acts of exploitation, oppression, and suffering inflicted by humans on other humans.

¹⁵⁷ Crisis Group interview, expert, Makhachkala, November 2015.

¹⁵⁸ Crisis Group Skype interview, Elena Milashina, January 2016.

¹⁵⁹ Crisis Group interview, January 2016.

¹⁶⁰ Crisis Group interview, December 2015.

band an apostate.¹⁶¹ Sources say the case is not exceptional. A Chechen women rights activist explained:

Young girls want to escape from their parents' control, to do something on their own, to leap into an adventure. I know of a few women who escaped after a traumatic divorce. One young woman recently, her first marriage was a total disaster. And here comes this IS jihadist who cures her complexes and tells her that she is select and has an exceptional mission.¹⁶²

"IS is a project for youth, so you often have a love story in these personal trajectories", a lawyer working with people who had IS contacts said.¹⁶³

Unlike the Caucasus Emirate, which has been heavily suppressed, so has functioned in deep underground, IS positions itself as a feasible political project. The life span of an average jihadist in Russia is short. IS offers an alternative to a purely suicidal enterprise, sets political goals for this lifetime and has achieved some. Much IS propaganda features peaceful work and idyllic nature. As well as fighters, IS recruits doctors, economists and oil industry engineers. People with few prospects at home and under constant security attention due to their religious choices feel IS offers a place with no such harassment, no clans that dominate all spheres of life and where they can move up the social ladder on merit. Some genuinely believe it is the chance of their lifetime.

B. *Efficient Islamic Governance*

The promise of efficient Islamic governance is another key aspect of IS propaganda. Al-Qaeda sought an Islamic state, but even when it gained territory, it did not focus on building statehood. IS does. "At first they managed to create an almost ideal administrative order, and many Muslims really liked it. So many people told me that I had to go there and see it with my own eyes, and I would then be convinced", a North Caucasus migrant in Turkey said. "They have eradicated gambling, smoking and prostitution; they pay salaries and welfare support; the judicial system works, punishments are implemented, and that's what many Muslims want", another Salafi explained.¹⁶⁴

IS is the only jihad project that invites fighters to join with families. Unlike al-Nusra, where women only exceptionally stay with their husbands close to front lines, IS men fight, then come back home to live with their families; this is attractive for many. Because IS seems feasible, young radical women who want to marry mujahidin are enticed to join. "It is better to be a widow of a *shaheed* (martyr) than wife of a coward", is a popular slogan in those circles. IS is said to have a shortage of Russian-speaking wives; Syrians do not want their women to marry foreign fighters, so it prioritises recruitment of Russian-speaking brides.¹⁶⁵

Widows of killed insurgents are also joining in significant numbers. In Russia, the life of such widows, or women whose husbands have been sentenced for insurgency crimes, is next to unbearable: finding a job or renting a flat become almost in-

¹⁶¹ "To the Islamic State and Back", Crisis Group blog, 1 December 2015.

¹⁶² Crisis Group Skype interview, February 2016.

¹⁶³ Crisis Group interview, Sapiyat Magomedova, Makhachkala, November 2015.

¹⁶⁴ Crisis Group interview and Skype interview, Istanbul, December 2015.

¹⁶⁵ Crisis Group interview, Joanna Paraszczuk, London, December 2015.

surmountable obstacles; children have problems at schools; widows in Dagestan are reportedly often deprived of state pensions for children, and many struggle for sheer survival.¹⁶⁶ With no channels to voice grievances or change their situation in Russia, these women are desperate.

The “Makhachkala female *jamaat*”, a group of young women who married insurgents and remarried other insurgents after their first husbands had been killed – have frequently been accused of being insurgency accomplices or direct participants. They were a headache for local security services, but most, especially widows, seem to have resettled to the Middle East.¹⁶⁷ Some have gone to Turkey, but most to IS, which provides social support. “In our village we used to have a house for widows with children; they could live there for free and were helped by the community. The house is empty now; all have resettled,” a Salafi activist from Northern Dagestan said.¹⁶⁸

There is much less information about single Chechen women going to Syria. The only well-known case is that of Seda Dudurkaeva, a stunningly beautiful twenty-year-old daughter of the migration service department director, who went there and married a young Chechen fighter in IS. Soon her husband was killed, and Abu Omar Shishani reportedly made her his wife.¹⁶⁹ Seda’s choice devastated her family, which was allegedly severely repressed by the Chechen authorities after they learned who her new husband was.¹⁷⁰

“The cases of single women’s escapes are deeply concealed and underreported”, a Chechen activist said. This is probably explained by the strong grip of tradition that restricts single women from emancipated decisions, which are considered a great shame for their families. The reported number of families resettling to IS from Chechnya is also very small, which can be explained by the tradition of keeping women and children off the battlefield. Most Chechen families that go to IS probably do so from the diasporas. “The cases of children of officials and elite in Chechnya also become frequent”, according to activist, which is an element of rebellion and protest.¹⁷¹

Few backed IS before it seized territory and resources and proved its capacity to govern. To win supporters, IS must show momentum and ability to deliver. Numerous sources indicate that military defeats, indiscriminate bombing and governance problems have hurt its recruitment appeal in the North Caucasus.¹⁷²

C. *Welfare and Revenge*

IS portrays itself as an egalitarian welfare project. In the post-Soviet context, justice is linked to social equality, jobs and a certain income level the state is expected to provide. In the North Caucasus, authoritarianism and clanship, inequality and economies trapped in predatory government practices create disillusioned youths who cannot have a dignified life in their homeland. Many graduated from local universi-

¹⁶⁶ Crisis Group interviews, wives of sentenced insurgents, Izberbash, Dagestan, November 2015.

¹⁶⁷ Crisis Group observations, interviews, Salafi activists, Makhachkala, November 2015.

¹⁶⁸ Crisis Group interview, Salafi activist, Khasavyurt region, Dagestan, November 2015.

¹⁶⁹ “Дочь уволенного Кадыровым главы УФМС вышла замуж за боевика в Сирии” [“The daughter of the head of UFMS dismissed by Kadyrov married an insurgent in Syria”], Lifenews, 2 December 2013. “Дочь чеченского министра стала женой лидера ‘ИГ’ (ВИДЕО)” [“Daughter of Chechen minister became wife of IS leader (video)”], Anspress, 30 October 2014.

¹⁷⁰ Crisis Group Skype interview, Chechen activists, February 2016.

¹⁷¹ Crisis Group Skype interview, Chechen activists, February 2016, *ibid*.

¹⁷² Crisis Group interviews, experts, activists, Dagestan, Istanbul, November-December 2015.

ties; their expectations of jobs are high, but the few available are manual and poorly paid. With no income, they cannot marry and have children. “What unites most of these recruits”, a Chechen journalist said, “is that they are either unemployed or couldn’t find jobs to their taste. That’s why many more rural youths join; Grozny young people have more opportunities”.¹⁷³

IS gives settlers flats, captured after ousting “the infidels”, and pays subsidies – \$100 for men, \$50 for women and \$35 for each child. Men receive subsidies only if they fight or work in the police. “If he doesn’t want to fight, no one will force him, but he has to make a living himself – something most recruits don’t know until they arrive in IS”, a witness said.¹⁷⁴

Abu Omar (Umar) Shishani’s propaganda has emphasised that he can now feed not only himself, but also his brothers at home. According to an expert, “everyone knows that Abu Omar earns a lot from the spoils, and money was clearly something North Caucasus insurgent leaders were hoping for when they rebranded, and something those who join IS count on”.¹⁷⁵ Thus far, however, no additional financial resources have reached the insurgency, which is seen as the main reason why its activity has been minimal in the past year.¹⁷⁶

Another major IS motivation driver is its response to the perceived humiliation of Muslims around the world. Videos of atrocities allegedly committed by the Syrian army and of civilian victims of the Western and now Russian bombing campaigns are central to this. A Salafi activist said, “when you feel that injustice around you comes up to your throat, you feel powerless and angry; the shortest way to restore your balance is to take revenge”. Another contact explained: “The desire for revenge is enormous, and they want [it] theatrically, as IS does”.¹⁷⁷ The revenge factor is especially strong for diaspora Chechens, who remember the atrocities of war. As a song by the famous wartime bard singer Timur Mutsuraev popular in blogs of Chechen foreign fighters, goes, “I survived to be able to live; I survived to be able to believe; I survived to be able to take revenge. So many of us are like this, and nothing can change us”.¹⁷⁸

High levels of repression push youths to extreme radicalisation and violent jihad. “This youth is thinking primitively; it doesn’t understand long-term strategies”, an Istanbul-based Salafi from Kabardino-Balkaria explained. “They want simple slogans here and now. The state has helped them radicalise for decades, so they will sympathise with the most radical movements, and if something even more blood-thirsty appears, they will follow it”.¹⁷⁹ The ideology of *takfir* liberates followers from the limitations imposed by ties of traditions and families and makes it easier to kill fellow men, since any who have not recognised the Caliph are apostates, thus legitimate targets.

Not all who go to IS are thirsty for blood; many try to discount accounts of reported IS atrocities as Western, Russian, Assad or Iranian propaganda. According to a Salafi intellectual in Istanbul, “it is amazing how they try to find justifications; they

¹⁷³ Crisis Group Skype interview, Chechen journalist, January 2016.

¹⁷⁴ Crisis Group interview, witness for five months in IS, Mountain Dagestan, November 2015.

¹⁷⁵ Crisis Group interview, Joanna Paraszczuk, London, December 2015.

¹⁷⁶ Crisis Group interview, Salafi activists, experts, Dagestan, November 2015.

¹⁷⁷ Crisis Group interview, Salafi activists, Northern Dagestan, November 2015.

¹⁷⁸ Timur Mutsuraev, “Я остался живым, чтобы мстить” [“I survived to be able to have revenge”], video available on Youtube.com, 25 August 2013.

¹⁷⁹ Crisis Group Skype interview, Kabardine *muhajir* in Istanbul, December 2015.

say, ‘it’s not proven’, ‘there’s no Sharia evidence’. They try not to think about it”.¹⁸⁰ Nonetheless, they have to face extreme brutality upon arrival. Those who travel to IS with romantic notions are inevitably disillusioned. IS strategy is first to attract, then to radicalise further, said an Islamist activist:

At some point the unmet expectations transform; IS demands that he kills, and he agrees. He has no way back, and they convince him that the victim deserves death. If I am convinced that a person deserves killing, I wouldn’t hesitate to kill. Cruelty is like a muscle; it can be easily trained.¹⁸¹

D. *Effective Propaganda*

IS markets itself professionally. “It’s a state of slogans”, a Dagestani Salafi believer explained.¹⁸² Efforts to counter this propaganda ideologically have nowhere been sufficiently effective. In July 2015, IS consolidated propaganda toward Russian speakers by creating a Russian language “Furat media”, which targets them, and every military unit in IS reportedly has a cameraman or a media specialist. Until then, the main resource had been Abu Omar Shishani’s personal website, run by Abu Jihad. Called FiSyria, it published news and videos from IS for two and a half years. Furat media is more strategic and professional; apart from news, it publishes a colourful magazine, *Istok*. Today’s radical Islamic youth read little, so the bright, simple, Hollywood-style pictures and videos with black flags and special effects have much more appeal. Strategic videos produced by IS and translated quickly from Arabic into Russian aim not only to recruit new fighters, but also to inform and indoctrinate the existing IS Russian-speaking community. IS’s Al-Bayan radio also features daily programs in Russian.¹⁸³

Furat is mainly on Twitter, from where its satellites also disseminate the messages. The Russian government has made a significant effort to remove jihadist propaganda from the internet. According to an expert, “Vkontakte [the Russian-language Facebook alternative] has been mainly used by IS; Facebook, by the Caucasus Emirate; Vilayat Kavkaz is now on the smartphone messenger Telegram. However, the Russian social media are quite efficient in blocking jihadist materials”.¹⁸⁴ According to the Russian FSB chief, Alexander Bortnikov, over 3,000 such information resources were blocked by the authorities in 2015.¹⁸⁵ However, they remain accessible through proxy-services and on messengers; IS successfully runs at least two channels on Telegram.

¹⁸⁰ Crisis Group interview, Istanbul, December 2015.

¹⁸¹ Crisis Group interview, Makhachkala, November 2015.

¹⁸² Crisis Group interview, Salafi activist, Dagestan, Makhachkala, November 2015.

¹⁸³ Europol, op. cit.

¹⁸⁴ Crisis Group interview, Joanna Paraszczuk, London, November 2015.

¹⁸⁵ TASS, 15 December 2015, op. cit.

V. Prevention and De-radicalisation

The IS culture, including the socialisation of children and teenagers to violent jihad and the banalisation of suicide-bombings, is producing a generation of young people raised in ultra-radical, extremist ideology who may present a challenge for generations to come. The jihadist camps that freely functioned in Chechnya for over two years between the two wars (1996-1999) produced a new generation that has created cells of jihadists throughout the North Caucasus and contributed to the emergence of the region-wide Caucasus Emirate project.¹⁸⁶ Devising global strategies for countering IS should consider this experience. The analysis of drivers of jihadism in Iraq and Syria suggests that if IS stops being a successful project that controls significant territory and can claim to run a functioning state, it will lose a significant part of its charisma. Recent military losses are already producing growing understanding that it is not as great a place to start a new life with families as its propaganda says.

In Russia, severe deficits of justice – lack of rule of law, accountability and public participation in decision-making; bad governance; corruption; and economic underdevelopment – are all conducive to jihad’s appeal.¹⁸⁷ Russian policymakers should recognise that IS manipulates and exploits legitimate grievances in the North Caucasus and instrumentalises the sense of disenfranchisement, humiliation and persecution prevalent among mostly non-violent fundamentalist Muslim believers.

According to a Salafi activist, “radicalisation is a process that consists of many small episodes, incidents, cases of injustice, moments of hurt dignity. These episodes come together in a mosaic picture of the world, and at some point one decides that he cannot accept it and wants to wage a war against it”.¹⁸⁸ Radical Islamist ideology offers such an action plan for the already angered youth or for those who want to realise their ambitions or improve their financial status by channelling this anger. However, radicalisation often precedes Islamisation, and its root causes should be addressed. Russian officials say their experience of countering terrorism in the North Caucasus is the only successful example of de-radicalisation, but their policies had little to do with de-radicalisation per se.¹⁸⁹ The current reduction of violence results from the insurgents’ military defeat, coupled with export of the North Caucasus jihad to the Middle East. Russia needs to focus substantively on de-radicalisation and active counter-propaganda.

Respectful treatment of conservative Muslims, particularly Salafis, and the absence of political pressure can be important first steps. A migrant from Kabardino-Balkaria noted:

[After leaving the Caucasus] I settled in a Circassian village in Turkey and worked at construction sites. It was very hard to make a living, but Turks are very supportive and hospitable to migrants from the Caucasus. People around me had very moderate views. I was studying the Quran whenever I had free time, tried to find people knowledgeable in Islam and learn from them. ... No one harassed me

¹⁸⁶ Crisis Group Report, *The Challenges of Integration (I)*, op. cit, p. 11.

¹⁸⁷ See Crisis Group Report, *The Challenges of Integration (IV)*, op. cit.

¹⁸⁸ Crisis Group interview, Salafi believer, Dagestan, December 2015.

¹⁸⁹ “Если ничего не предпринимать, то террористическая угроза приобретет для нас еще более серьезные масштабы” [“If we do nothing, then the terrorist threat will become much more serious for us”], *Kommersant*, 20 November 2015.

or asked any questions. I used to support the Caucasus Emirate ..., but now I think all these radical movements are a mistake.¹⁹⁰

However, the change of conditions alone is often not enough. Therefore, strategies require detailed understanding of paths, mechanisms and stages of radicalisation and identifying relevant actors in the process. Families and police have limited potential to influence those who make radical choices. “One can’t defeat religious arguments by secular logic”, the father of a former fighter in Syria said, “and for the most part, the parents of these kids are not religious; if they are religious, then in a different way”. Similarly, a Salafi woman from Dagestan recalled:

Our local policeman [was] my father’s classmate; he came to our place and started to explain to me that my Muslim attire was inadequate, that our religion was originally revealed to the Arabs [who] had to wear such clothes to protect their skin from strong sun; he tried to convince me I had to live in compliance with my society’s customs. I was laughing at him in my heart.¹⁹¹

Nonetheless, families and police can cooperate when they see the first signals of trouble. Parents, the most interested in saving the lives of their children, should be the state’s first allies in de-radicalisation. In the North Caucasus, however, they are typically viewed with suspicion and usually persecuted for their children’s choices, especially in Chechnya.¹⁹² They should be encouraged to refer their children to credible religious leaders and trained de-radicalisation professionals. Police should prevent the physical departure of potential jihadists to the Middle East, but with respect for their dignity and human rights and backed up by professional de-radicalisation engagement. Dagestan’s registration practice is counter-productive. More sophisticated methods of tracing, prevention and management should be devised, and detentions and criminal charges should be based on credible evidence and carried out within the framework of the law.

Official clergy are crucial for general prevention and explaining peaceful Islam but have limited influence on fundamentalist youths, for whom they lack legitimacy due to cooperation with the authorities and dogma differences. Cooperating with fundamentalist Muslim clerics and Salafi activists, who can provide the most valuable support in drawing already radicalising youths away from violent extremist groups, is not easy for governments. They often come from suspect communities and neither trust the authorities nor are eager to cooperate. The few moderate Salafi scholars in Russia are under pressure from the security services, and the lives of some in Dagestan have been threatened by IS supporters.

Ideological de-radicalisation should be based on Salafi religious arguments. A Salafi leader explained:

Recently parents asked me to speak to their son. They found him a good job, but he failed at it. He had no knowledge of Islam but decided to join IS. I reminded him of the main principle of Oneness of God “There can be no intermediary between you and Allah. You are going to follow some strange Caliph, whom no scholar has recognised ..., and he will tell you to go and cut someone’s throat.

¹⁹⁰ Crisis Group interview, Istanbul, December 2015.

¹⁹¹ Crisis Group interviews, Dagestan, November, December 2015.

¹⁹² “‘What Your Children Do Will Touch You’. Punitive House-Burning in Chechnya”, Human Rights Watch, 2 July 2009.

And you will go and do it. How are you going to explain this to Allah? Why did you put this man between yourself and God, and commit a crime on his order? It's better to ... be killed than to do this". Eventually this chap did not join.¹⁹³

Respect for a mother is a high value in Islam, which requires that her permission be asked to join a non-obligatory jihad and that she at least be informed of intention to join an obligatory one. "Paradise lies at the feet of your mothers", the Prophet Muhammad said.¹⁹⁴ Sometimes this factor can be used as a preventative measure. Mothers of current and potential IS fighters should engage with the authorities as constructively as possible in the interest of their children. Narratives about the suffering inflicted on a family by a child's departure for violent jihad have sometimes been effective for deterring others.¹⁹⁵

Intellectual resources and techniques should be pooled to produce nuanced, coherent methodology and exit programs based on religious arguments as part of any soft-power de-radicalisation strategy. Practitioners, field-based independent experts, psychological counsellors, open-minded security personnel and moderate fundamentalist leaders should be part of the process. Simple, accessible materials exist in Arabic, with maps and videos, that explain from the Salafi perspective why IS contradicts Sharia. Easily accessible interactive websites with translations of the most important Arabic texts, lectures and lessons by domestic Islamic scholars need to be part of this effort. Counter-propaganda in social media must also be creative, fresh and professional. Contacts with independent Islamic scholars respected by fundamentalist youths are equally important. "The only way to prevent radicalisation is to persuade We should create as many discussion forums as possible and allow free and competent debate led by people with good religious knowledge", a Chechen journalist said.¹⁹⁶

Those attracted to violent jihad share no single path or consistent set of socio-economic or psychological conditions, but experts and religious leaders agree that most lack sufficient education, Islamic and secular, and share anger about the real and perceived injustices of the world. A senior Salafi leader said, "this youth is in crisis. They are disoriented".¹⁹⁷ Education quality in the North Caucasus has dramatically fallen from Soviet times. Russia is investing in infrastructure, but corruption and lack of teachers are systemic defects.

Idleness and poor self-realisation contribute to radicalism. "These youths need to be in demand", a Chechen activist working on youth projects said. "We should involve them not in endless patriotic clubs, but ... activities according to their needs and interests. They should not feel left out of this life and have lots of free time".¹⁹⁸ Traditionally high birth rates increase social infrastructure deficits. The region has the fewest sport venues and cultural institutions per capita in Russia, and many libraries, theatres, children's art schools and entertainment facilities have closed.¹⁹⁹ The

¹⁹³ Crisis Group interview, Makhachkala, December 2015.

¹⁹⁴ "Mothers of ISIS", The Huffington Post, 12 August 2015.

¹⁹⁵ "Матери погибших парней в Сирии: 'Ребята не делайте нам больно ...'" ["The mothers of men who died in Syria: 'Guys do not hurt us ...'"], Makhachkala city administration website, 8 December 2015.

¹⁹⁶ Crisis Group Skype interview, Chechen journalist, January 2016.

¹⁹⁷ Crisis Group interview, Salafi leader, Makhachkala, January 2016.

¹⁹⁸ Crisis Group Skype interview, January 2016.

¹⁹⁹ Crisis Group Report, *The Challenges of Integration (IV)*, op. cit., p. 20.

government should fine-tune youth policies and redirect funds to give wider cultural, vocational and sport opportunities.

Finally, it is very important to create safe but controlled channels for return. According to Bortnikov, the FSB head, 214 of the 2,900 Russians fighting in Iraq and Syria have returned: “All have been taken under tight control of law-enforcement services; 80 have been sentenced, 41 have been arrested”.²⁰⁰ Numerous sources confirmed that many more who have joined IS apparently want to come home.²⁰¹ Women are desperate to escape, especially after their husbands were killed. Return is difficult, however, with smugglers allegedly requesting several thousand dollars. IS takes its residents’ passports, and escape is dangerous. For widows, it is nearly impossible.²⁰²

In Russia, any returnee, even a quickly disillusioned youth or a woman desperate to escape from Syria, faces a long prison term. All are charged with participation in an illegal armed group abroad (Article 208) or terrorism (Article 205). Article 208 allows those who voluntarily quit their participation to be exempted from criminal charges, but this is seldom applied to returnees from Syria. It would be important to do so for those who do not present security risks and are willing to contribute to counter-propaganda.

Evidence is sometimes fabricated. Crisis Group knows of several cases in Dagestan of fighters from an earlier period being tortured to confess they had fought in Syria after such actions were criminalised in Russia.²⁰³ Investigators may have inadequate knowledge of the Syrian conflict’s complexity; thus, Ingushetia authorities opened a criminal case against two Ingush men for “participation in anti-government armed formation Jaish al-Muhajereen al-Ansar, a structural part of the illegal armed formation ‘Islamic State’”, though, as noted above, JMA fights beside al-Nusra, which is hostile to IS.²⁰⁴

Fighters returning from IS are a new, more dangerous jihadist generation, presenting special integration challenges. The strategy, as in most countries, has been to incarcerate without distinction.²⁰⁵ However, many returnees have become disillusioned with IS and never did violent acts. “Many of these returnees or those stopped at the borders are very young, sixteen or seventeen; they could not fully understand what they were doing, and now they are sentenced to five or six years in jail. What”, a Chechen journalist asked, “will happen to them after those years?”²⁰⁶ Prisons, in Russia as in Europe, breed radicalisation.²⁰⁷ “It’s a huge mistake to close them all in

²⁰⁰ TASS, 15 December 2015, op. cit.

²⁰¹ Crisis Group interviews, experts, human rights and Salafi activists, Dagestan, Turkey, November–December 2015.

²⁰² Crisis Group interview, Salafi believer, Istanbul, December 2015.

²⁰³ “My brother was forced to confess that he fought with Hizbollah against Assad”, Crisis Group interview, family member, Dagestan, November 2015.

²⁰⁴ “В отношении двух жителей республики возбуждены уголовные дела по подозрению в участии на территории иностранного государства в вооруженном формировании, не предусмотренном законодательством данного государства” [“Criminal proceedings are initiated against two residents of the republic on suspicion of unlawful involvement in an armed formation in a foreign state”], <http://ingushetia.sledcom.ru>.

²⁰⁵ Just before he was killed, CE amir Muhammad Gimrinsky appointed Abu Dujan, a veteran of the Syria jihad, amir of the Mountain Sector of the Vilayat Dagestani. “Подготовка теракта в Москве: диверсанты были двойными агентами?” [“Preparing a terrorist attack in Moscow: were the terrorists double agents?”], МК.ru, 12 October 2015.

²⁰⁶ Crisis Group Skype interview, Chechen journalist, January 2016.

²⁰⁷ “From jail to jihad? The threat of prison radicalisation”, BBC News, 12 May 2014.

prisons, especially those who never reached the Middle East”, a Chechnya expert said. “They are not only themselves radicalising, but also influencing others. I know of some senior and educated prisoners who became IS fans in prisons. Open-minded security officials understand ... this”.²⁰⁸ The authorities should consider special prison measures to prevent dissemination of jihadist views, but prolonged solitary confinement is no solution.

As described, four North Caucasus republics had commissions between 2010 and 2012 for rehabilitation of fighters, which guaranteed safe return to peaceful life. After the Sochi Olympics, only Ingushetia’s remained fully operational; in February 2016, the commission in Kabardino-Balkaria processed its first case in four years. Ingushetia’s experience and that of a similar program in Denmark should be studied closely.²⁰⁹

Witness testimony of disillusioned returnees can be the most convincing prevention tool against recruitment to Iraq and Syria. The Chechen authorities successfully used the testimony of one such, Said Mazhaev, in propaganda against IS. He spoke on TV, participated around Chechnya in roundtables with youth and was sentenced to only eight months in jail.²¹⁰ A source asserted that some who fled IS were so angry they were looking for ways to take revenge on their recruiters: “I know one young man whose mother was badly mistreated in IS; he escaped and wanted to do *ishtikhadia* [suicide bombing] against IS”.²¹¹ Those still deciding whether to go need to know such stories.

²⁰⁸ Crisis Group Skype interview, Elena Milashina, *Novaya Gazeta*, January 2016.

²⁰⁹ “For jihadists, Denmark tries rehabilitation”, *The New York Times*, 13 December 2014; “The making of a French jihadi”, FT.com, 26 January 2015.

²¹⁰ “Боевик из Сирии Саид Мажаев вернулся домой в Чечню” [“An insurgent from Syria, said Mazhaev, returned home to Chechnya”], video available on Youtube.com, 7 March 2015. Inna Blenova was the wife of Robert Zankishiev, who defected to IS and was killed by security services on 10 November 2015. “Комиссия по адаптации боевиков в Нальчике пообещала помочь Инне Бленаовой” [“Commission for rehabilitation of fighters in Nalchik promised to help Inna Blenova”], *Caucasian Knot*, 18 February 2016.

²¹¹ Crisis Group interview, North Caucasus migrant, Istanbul, December 2015.

VI. Conclusion

In 2015, the North Caucasus insurgency underwent a major ideological transformation and rebranded itself as a province of IS. However, “the Caliphate has marked its presence in the Caucasus by silence”.²¹² In 2015, the only known attacks by IS affiliates in the region, all in Dagestan, have been the murder of a village mosque’s imam, the shooting of a fortune teller’s family and the attack on Derbent castle, which killed one and injured eleven at year’s end.²¹³ In February 2016, IS claimed responsibility for a suicide attack in South Dagestan, which killed four and injured eighteen.²¹⁴ New converts to IS have been waiting for financial support that has not come. Thus far, IS has not tried to use the North Caucasus for its political ends, and Russia’s security services are keeping the situation under control.

But the security challenge is serious. North Caucasus jihadists have become global actors, playing key roles in some major IS military efforts in Syria and leading some of the most active jihadist groups there and in Iraq. They have repeatedly issued threats to Russia and its leaders, closely monitor developments there and put out statements aimed at inciting youths to terrorism. Small, weakened but still quite numerous jihadist groups are based in the region, while cells and networks emerge across Russia with strong ties to groups in the Middle East. IS can use its support base in the North Caucasus to attempt major attacks in Russia.

Meanwhile, the outflow of North Caucasus jihadists to Syria continues. IS attracts both men and women with its formula of shocking violence and an appearance of stability and dignity. The combination of strong religious messaging, on-the-ground successes, ultra-aggressive war tactics, positive social agenda and powerful propaganda has energised thousands. IS also takes advantage of the unaddressed root causes of the North Caucasus conflict. Russian policymakers need to recognise that IS exploits legitimate grievances, including a sense of disenfranchisement and sometimes brutal deprivation of basic rights among fundamentalist Muslims, inequality and lack of economic opportunities. The Kremlin should aim to generate a more open and just system of government in the region, improve the rule of law, stop prosecuting religious dissent, continue investing in socio-economic development, especially education, and attempt more soft-power de-radicalisation if it wishes to deprive IS of a new front and an important source of recruits.

Brussels, 16 March 2016

²¹² Crisis Group interview, Grigory Shvedov, chief editor, The Caucasus Knot, Moscow 2015.

²¹³ See “Имам Магомед Хидиров убит в Дагестане” [“Imam Magomed Khidirov killed in Dagestan”]; “Семья гадалки убита в Дагестане” [“A fortune teller’s family killed in Dagestan”]; “В Дербенте обстреляли туристов перед крепостью НарынКала” [“Tourists were fired on in front of the Naryn Kala fortress in Derbent”], TASS, 30 December 2015.

²¹⁴ “Дагестан-хроника террора (1996-2016)” [“Dagestan: Chronicle of Terror (1996-2016)”], Caucasian Knot, 17 February 2016.

Appendix A: Map of the North Caucasus and Parts of the Middle East

