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A Comparative Analysis of the Caucasus Emirate Islamic Ideology within the Global-Salafi Jihad

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Key Points:

- Islamic radicalization is not a single pathway that can be depicted by a binary understanding of Islam and extremism.
- The support for the Global-Salafi jihad within North Caucasian society remains partial and eclectic, as radical Islamic views do not directly translate into open support for the Caucasus Emirate or international jihad in general.
- Although ideologically linked with global jihad, the Caucasus Emirate remains mostly driven by local and nationalistic imperatives, which has produced considerable tensions with extremist elements in the organization and within the region.
- These tensions have resulted in the growing influx of Caucasian volunteers in Syria, and the gradual loss of influence of the Caucasus Emirate inside global jihad

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This brief addresses the relationship between the Caucasus Emirate (CE) and the Global-Salafi jihad following the death of Doku Umarov, and the rapid ascent of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), which has become the main hub for jihadist ideology in the world. In order to do so, this paper discusses the role and the involvement of the Caucasus Emirate in the global jihad, going from its unofficial alignment with Al Qaeda since 2007 to the ideological struggle with ISIS in 2014. This article demonstrates that the support for the Global-Salafi jihad within North Caucasian society remains partial and eclectic, as radical Islamic views do not translate directly into open support for the Caucasus Emirate or the international jihad in general. In order to argue this uncommon conception of radical Islam in the North Caucasus, I discuss the general understanding of Islamic radicalization among young people in the North Caucasus in order to underline the reasons why a growing number of individuals have decided to fight jihad in Syria rather than at home in the North Caucasus. From there, I look at the evolution of the role of the Caucasus Emirate and its lack of influence across the global Ummah, even among its own pool of potential militants in Russia and abroad. Finally, I discuss how tensions between local grievances and Ummah-based grievances have led to recurrent tensions within the North Caucasian insurgency.

Generational Change among North Caucasians

Scholars have observed the growing importance of Islam for the younger generation of North Caucasians, as well as a recent generational change inside the insurgency in the North Caucasus (Moore and Tumelty 2008; Ware and Kisriev 2010; Shterin and Yarlykapov 2011; Ratelle 2013). The post-Soviet generation came into contact with Islam earlier in their lives and often adopted a "purer" version, that is, a literal and orthodox understanding of Islam, in accordance with the practices of the companions of the prophet (*Salaf*). Although this form of Islam has no roots in the North Caucasus, it quickly found fertile soil among the youth. A recent survey conducted with students in Dagestan showed that twenty percent of respondents called themselves moderate Salafi and only ten percent, Sufi.[1] The reasons for this religious awakening and the growing importance of radical forms of Islam in the North Caucasus, especially in Dagestan, Kabardino-Balkaria, and Chechnya, are manifold. However, many young people perceive Islam as a way to challenge the traditional societal and clan structure in the region. "Pure Islam"[2] invites its followers to interpret Islamic knowledge—the Koran and the Hadith—themselves rather than getting them to rely on the local institutional interpretation provided by governmental institutions, such as the local spiritual boards (DUM). By supporting a violent governmental crackdown on unofficial mosques as well as religious profiling against radical forms of Islam throughout the 2000s, the official religious elites have been identified as local puppets out to control Islamic faith. Furthermore, these traditional religious elites are seen as being corrupt and as co-opted by the local governments. "Pure Islam" also offers a way for the younger generation to contest the status quo within society and to denounce socio-economic problems, such as the absence of social mobility or employment.

It is against the backdrop of this Islamic revival in the North Caucasus that insurgent violence began spreading throughout the region from the end of the 1990s. From a Chechen-based organization, the insurgency has established its roots in Ingushetia, Dagestan, and Kabardino-Balkaria, as well as adopting an official Global-Salafi ideology with the creation of the Caucasus Emirate in 2007. According to certain authors, the growing popular support for this "Islamic" insurgency has been the direct effect of global jihad in the North Caucasus (Hahn 2007; 2014). At the same time, other authors have underlined the limited ties between the CE and foreign jihadist networks, such as Al Qaeda, as an argument to challenge the assumption that the North Caucasus insurgency is fully integrated into the global jihad. It has been argued that local incentives such as corruption, nepotism, socio-economic conditions, religious repression, and retaliation better explain the development of religious insurgent groups in the North Caucasus. Rather than religion being a trigger for the violence, it is simply the by-product of exclusion and participation in insurgent groups (see Ratelle and Souleimanov 2015).

While conducting fieldwork in the region, I have observed that there is ambivalent support for jihadism and the global jihad among Islamic radicals in Dagestan, Chechnya, and Kabardino-Balkaria, as well a common narrative that casts "pure Islam" as way to reform North Caucasian societies. In other words, Salafism is often understood as a tool for social progress, rather than as part of a common struggle against infidels. The interpretation of Salafism in the North Caucasus is more inclusive than a simple sectarian depiction of social life. The majority of North Caucasian Islamic radicals see it as their duty to reform their corrupt societies, rather than to promote a global jihadist agenda. At the same time, a minority of individuals has expressed support for the global jihad throughout my research in the region. It is among these individuals that Syria's call for jihad has found fertile soil. Many Caucasians from the European diaspora as well as from the North and the South Caucasus have answered this call for jihad based on a perception of religious duty associated with the global Ummah. According to Mairbek Vatchagaev, as many as 1,500 Chechens might be currently fighting in Syria.[3] Other authors, such as Joanna Paraszczuk, give more a conservative estimate of between 200 and 1,700 fighters.[4] Most of the Chechen fighters come from Turkey, Western Europe (100-200), Georgia (70) and to a lesser extent from Chechnya itself (30-100). At the same time, foreign fighters from the North Caucasus are not limited to ethnic Chechens, as many Dagestanis, Nogais, and other nationalities have also travelled to Syria. This wave of support for jihad demonstrates that it would be a mistake not to take seriously the importance of Global-Salafi jihad in the Caucasus.

The Islamic revival and the importance of radicalization in the North Caucasus is a much more eclectic phenomenon than the dichotomy that is presented by researchers, who project it as a sectarian conflict between Salafi extremists and local authorities. Although extremist religious factions associated with ISIS exist in the North Caucasus, they remain a minority and should therefore not restrict us from seeking to understand Islamic radicalization as more general phenomenon. At the same time, the puzzle that needs explaining is why Caucasian volunteers decide to travel to Syria and Iraq to wage jihad when the Caucasus Emirate is waging a similar jihad against the Russian state. The reasons why North Caucasians leave for Syria rather than fight in the North Caucasus are various, and might help us understand the current importance of Global-Salafi jihad ideology in the region.

For many Chechens that live or were born in exile in Western Europe and in Georgia, it is often easier to get to Syria than it is to the North Caucasus. The testimony of Murad Margoshvili, aka Muslim Abu Walid Shishani, confirms that many Caucasians have tried to enter Chechnya or Dagestan but subsequently opted for Syria when faced with difficulties in getting to it.[5] Furthermore, the Caucasus Emirate and its various factions have been unable to successfully integrate foreign fighters, such as the members of the Caucasian diaspora and other recruits, without prior military training. Because of potential security breaches and the danger of airstrikes against local bases, the Caucasus Emirate has acknowledged that they do not have the capacity to provide military training to foreign fighters. For this particular reason, many young North Caucasians have chosen to go to Syria in order to join jihad rather than to wait for their turn in Chechnya. They see Syria as an opportunity to gain access to military training as well as to create links with jihadist organizations across the Middle East. It is also important to acknowledge the level of danger, the difficulties, as well as the high mortality rate amongst new recruits in the North Caucasus. Syria and Iraq represent a strategic choice in order to maximize personal survival while fighting jihad and acquiring military experience.

If practical elements can explain why members of the Caucasian diaspora have chosen Syria over the North Caucasus, the same cannot be said about the entire contingent of North Caucasians leaving Dagestan and Chechnya to go and fight in Syria. In fact, the social cost involved in waging jihad in Syria seems extremely high for these individuals, as they are gravely endangering their relatives in the North Caucasus. In order to understand the refusal to wage jihad at home, one should also further investigate other potential incentives. I suggest we look at the

perception of the Caucasus Emirate among young extremists. This perception has greatly suffered in recent years, as Syria has replaced the Caucasus Emirate as the priority among many North Caucasian jihadists, who dream of establishing an Islamic state where Sharia is fully enforced and respected.

The Caucasus Emirate's declining profile within the Global-Salafi Jihad

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Chechnya and the North Caucasus were seen as a potential Islamic state in the making, from which a wider transnational jihad could develop. The Chechen insurgency, driven by Ibn al-Khattab's propaganda skills, was able to establish itself as one of the main hubs of Islamic resistance against non-believers. They also managed to advertize their jihadist activities in order to gather support from Islamic sponsors and foreign fighters. A series of contingencies at the beginning of the 2000s—such as September 11, 2001, the invasion of Iraq in 2003, as well as the major setback of the Second Chechen war, and the death of Shamil Basayev in 2006—has limited the role of the North Caucasus in the global jihad.

Contrary to what many researchers argue, even after the proclamation of the Caucasus Emirate in 2007, the North Caucasus insurgency was never fully able to re-integrate the ranks of the Global-Salafi jihad. In order to survive against the Russian counter-insurgency and its loss of influence inside the global jihadist network, the local insurgency was forced to adapt and restructure its organization. Although its ideology remained oriented toward a Takfirist Al Qaeda-inspired model, its main recruitment was driven by local grievances and local struggles against the corrupt police forces. Rather than recruiting strictly religiously motivated combatants, the insurgency became an amalgamation of individuals fighting personal vendettas against the security forces and the political elites, persons wishing to enter into criminal dealings, and individuals who are fed up with corruption and nepotism.

In the context of the early establishment of the Caucasus Emirate in 2007, this eclectic amalgam of insurgents, uniting religiously driven individuals and ordinary fighters, alienated many Islamic extremists from volunteering in the North Caucasus. Contrary to what is put forward by American authors regarding the Caucasus Emirate, dynamics on the ground in the North Caucasus directly contradict the extremist ideology put forward by the ideological wing of the organization. Even with the Caucasus Emirate and the adoption of Global-Salafi jihad ideology, local leaders and potential recruits have raised doubts about the potential to oust Russian forces from the region and create an Islamic State in the coming years. The potential dream of an Islamic state in the Caucasus from the 1990s on has been slowly replaced by a difficult and highly dangerous jihad against the Russian state.

In these conditions, many religiously driven individuals from the Caucasus have underlined that Russia and the North Caucasus are no longer, in view of the situation in Syria, an Islamic priority. Rather than thinking in terms of territorial jihad, Muslim fighters should "*unite under one imam and swear allegiance to one organization.*" In other words, Islamic militants in the North Caucasus have now turned toward the global Ummah and the caliphate in the Levant, rather than toward the local jihad in the North Caucasus. ISIS's military successes in Syria and in Iraq as well as its capacity to efficiently control a large chunk of territory and establish a *de facto* Islamic state ruled by Sharia, have acted as catalysts to transform the image of the organization in Islamic militants' minds. The Caucasus Emirate's loss of influence within the Islamic world and within the global jihad could also be observed in the recent tensions between Al Qaeda and ISIS in Syria, tensions that have spilled-over into the Caucasus Emirate and its activities in the North Caucasus.

The Caucasus Emirate in Syria

In November 2012, Doku Umarov released a video statement supporting the jihad in Syria, although he criticized North Caucasian volunteers (foreign and domestic) for not providing any help or support to the Caucasian jihad and for choosing an easier jihad in Syria.[6] Already under Umarov's tenure, the relationship between the Syrian jihad and the Caucasus Emirate was relatively tense. Less than a year later, Umarov reviewed his statement and gave his tacit support for the Syrian jihad by appointing Emir Salahuddin al-Shishani as the official representative of the Caucasus Emirate in Syria. Until the end of 2013, Jaish al Muhajireen wal Ansar (JMA), also known as the Army of the Emigrants and Helpers or Muhajireen Army, acted as one of the main rebel groups in Syria for Caucasian volunteers. The group was created under the supervision of Salahuddin al-Shishani and Tarkhan Batirashvili, and was considered to be the Caucasus Emirate satellite branch in Syria, as well as being closely associated with Al Nusrah Front (Al Qaeda). According to certain analysts, Batrashvili was probably directly dispatched and financed by Doku Umarov to support the jihad in Syria.[7]

Following the announcement of Doku Umarov's death in March 2014, Aliaskhab Kebekov, an ethnic Avar from Dagestan, was appointed as the new Emir of the Caucasus Emirate. In order to impose his authority, Kebekov first sought to curb the outflow of Caucasian volunteers to Syria and set out his main theological and ideological views regarding the global jihad. He openly expressed his support for Ayman al-Zawahiri and referred to him as "the accepted leader and our sheikh," in direct defiance of ISIS's growing influence. With regard to the jihad in Syria, Kebekov asserts the absence of any fatwa from Al Qaeda's leadership to participate en masse in the jihad in Syria. With reference to a verse from the Koran, he has said that as *mujahedeen* Caucasians, they should, and I quote him "fight the enemy closest to us."[8] However, at the same time he admitted that some *hadith* recommend fighting in the Sham rather than in the local version of the jihad. Kebekov underlined that the main and indeed only rationale behind sending CE militants to Syria is to acquire military training and foster a new network inside the Salafi-jihadist network.[9] Although the CE leader acknowledges his will to participate in the establishment of the caliphate, his views of the latter remain driven by short-term objectives linked with the territorial jihad in the North Caucasus. His discourse has emphasized religious-nationalist grievances and local interests over and against the Ummah-based grievances and the global jihad defined around ISIS military objectives.

By the end of 2013, Batirashvili and his inner circle stood in formal opposition to the will of the current Caucasus Emirate leader,[10] when they swore allegiance to the ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, and simultaneously renounced their oath to the Caucasus Emirate. The remaining Caucasian fighters have re-affirmed their oath to the Caucasus Emirate under the local leadership of Salahuddin al-Shishani. Batirashvili's defection set off a chain reaction that underlined the structural tensions within the Caucasus Emirate. Reinforced by the split between moderate Syrian rebels, Al Qaeda, and ISIS, the Caucasus Emirate and its emir were dragged into an online verbal argument with their own militants in Syria, which underscored the precarious nature of the ideological structure of the North Caucasus insurgency.

In response to Kebekov's previous arguments against international jihad, Sham Today[11] has accused the Caucasus Emirate and the Kavkaz Center of being disconnected from the realities of the battlefield and of hiding from the real jihad currently being fought in Syria. While ISIS fighters are waging jihad against the world, the Caucasus Emirate and its leader are hiding in the forest of the North Caucasus.[12] Furthermore, it emphasized the negligible role played by the Caucasus Emirate in Syria, and underlined that the real contributions of the Caucasian fighters were coming from ordinary militants travelling to Syria by their own means. Rather than reasserting the dominant role of the Emir and the CE inside the global jihad, this online debate exposed the unexpected lack of influence of the long-standing North Caucasus insurgency, not to mention its lack of control over its own militants in Syria, and its shaky ground in terms of jihadist credentials. Finally, it emphasized the tension between Kebekov's de-territorialized visions of jihad in opposition to ISIS's transnational definition of jihad. The latter sees Syria and

Iraq as a new Afghanistan and as being able to help re-launch the project of global jihad after the losses suffered during the "War on Terror."[13]

From Syria to the North Caucasus: ISIS vs the Caucasus Emirate

The split between Al Qaeda (Al Nusrah Front) and ISIS, and subsequently also between Caucasian militants in Syria, has rapidly spilled over into the North Caucasus and fractured the insurgent factions in the region along existing fault lines. Between November 2014 and February 2015, several field commanders pledged allegiance to ISIS including the former Emir of Dagestan, Rustam Aseldarov, as well as other mid- to low-level commanders in Dagestan, Ingushetia, and Chechnya. Challenging Kebekov's authority as well as the role of the Caucasus Emirate in establishing a potential Islamic state on Russian territory, Aseldarov and the others have sought to use ISIS's momentum and reputation in order to establish themselves as jihadi-leading figures in the North Caucasus. These new ISIS factions might be more effective in attracting combatants from Syria (mostly Caucasians), as well as external funding in order to replenish the strength of the insurgency the North Caucasus. Should this happen, it could further jeopardize the precarious status of the current CE leadership, as it has been unable to attract financial support outside of the North Caucasian diaspora that is spread across the world. So far, Kebekov and other CE Dagestani leaders have publically decried their former comrades-in-arms after they pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and have asked them to leave the North Caucasus in order to support their new caliph in Iraq.[14] They have been unable to further sanction these defections and reassert their authority over the jihadist movement in the region. In fact, so far no violent clashes have been observed between ISIS and the CE factions in Dagestan. However, it remains possible that the violent clashes monitored in Syria could rapidly spread to Dagestan and Chechnya in the coming months. It is nonetheless still too early to draw any final conclusions about the importance and the role of ISIS in the North Caucasus and the potential for intra-religious violence.

Clashes and rifts between insurgent factions are not a new phenomenon in the North Caucasus. However, they have rarely been framed uniquely as a religious struggle over the interpretation of Islamic law, theology, and participation in the global jihad. When Umarov and Aslambek Vadalov clashed in 2010, it was often portrayed as a confrontation about the dominant role of Chechen fighters inside the Caucasus Emirate and not about its relationship with the global jihad.[15] While analyzing the split between ISIS and the CE in the North Caucasus, it might prove significant to return to the historical development of the insurgency in the post-Soviet North Caucasus. Previously, these rifts have been insufficiently studied by researchers and presented as epiphenomena, simple local frictions, nationalistic blips, or turf wars rather than investigated as a different understanding of the imperatives of jihad in the North Caucasus. They were dismissed as irrelevant in the Dudaev era and during the First Chechen war, presented as a causal factor in the onset of the Second Chechen war, and more recently analyzed in relation to the regional spillover of violence; however, they have never really been studied as a unique phenomenon. ISIS's arrival in the North Caucasus might force us to rethink how we study the insurgency, its various ideologies, and the crucial role they play in framing the socio-historical landscape of the region.

Conclusion

This policy brief has sought to underline three main elements of the role of the Caucasus Emirate within the global jihad. First, although ideologically linked with the global jihad, the Caucasus Emirate remains mostly driven by local and nationalistic imperatives, which has produced considerable tensions with extremist elements in the organization and in the region. Second, most of the Caucasian extremist insurgents seem to turn toward ISIS rather than to the CE, which reveals the gradual loss of influence that the North Caucasian insurgency is suffering within the global jihad. Finally, if, during the Umarov era, tensions between North Caucasian

nationalistic struggle and the extremist wing of the insurgency were kept to a strict minimum, Kebekov's new leadership and the crises in Syria have opened a can of worms by emphasizing the fault lines between the various factions in the Caucasus Emirate. As a reminder, the spectacular successes of the Chechenization process during the Second Chechen war were the result of the Russian policy of using structural tensions between moderates and extremists in order to gain control over Chechnya. Once again, the Russian government might be able to capitalize on these sectarian and nationalist tensions in order to suppress the insurgency in the region.

For us scholars studying insurgent violence and Islam in the North Caucasus, this demonstrates the importance of challenging our restricted understanding of Islamic radicalization as a single pathway that can be depicted by a binary understanding of Islam and extremism in the region. As emphasized by this policy brief, North Caucasus militants and insurgents are made up of various groups with heterogeneous understandings of Islam, of individuals who make choices between various radical (Salafism, Kadyrov Sufi-inspired Islam) and extremist ideologies (ISIS, Al Qaeda, the Caucasus Emirate, or more generally Takfirism). Future research should seek to explain this eclectic nature of religious radicalization instead of profiling militants based on the sole focus on Takfirist Islam. In other words, contrary to what certain scholars have claimed, the current debate in scholarship is not about displaying the link between global jihad and the North Caucasus, but rather about understanding why militants decide to adopt a particular ideology in a given context.

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[1] Asia Kapaeva, "V Dagestane 12% uchashcheisia molodezhi podderzhivaet boevikov," Kavkazskii uzel, 9 December 2011, available at http://dagestan.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/197318/.

[2] This label is recurrently used by the majority of Salafists in the North Caucasus. It avoids the political biases and potentially negative effects of labels such as Wahhabism and Salafism.

[3] http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=43000&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=7#.VFPU6fnF_Pp.

[4] http://jihadology.net/2014/06/04/the-clear-banner-the-clash-over-real-jihad-in-syria-isis-vs-the-caucasus-emirate/

[5] http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=21316.

[6] http://www.kavkazcenter.com/russ/content/2012/11/13/94315.shtml.

[7] http://www.fairobserver.com/region/europe/the-islamic-state-splits-the-caucasus-emirate-18941/; http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=21316.
[8] http://jihadology.net/2014/06/22/kavkaz-center-presents-a-new-video-message-from-imarat-al-qawqazs-ali-abu-mu%E1%B8%A5ammad-imarat-al-qawqazs-position-in-connection-with-the-fitnah-in-al-sham/.
[9] North Caucasian militants have challenged the idea of joining ISIS as way to acquire military training, see http://www.rferl.org/content/islamic-state-chechen-militants-cannon-fodder/26826487.html. See also, www.kavkazcenter.com/russ/content/2013/01/01/95284.shtml.; http://www.kavkazcenter.com/russ/content/2013/07/15/99263.shtml.
[10] Caucasus Emirate fighters in Syria were asked to remain neutral regarding the schism between Al Qaeda and ISIS. Doku Umarov most probably died in August 2013, leaving the Caucasus Emirate without an official leader for several months, a period that coincides with Batirashvili's defection.
[11] The propaganda and ideology media outlet operated by Batirashvili's loyalists in Syria.
[12] Previously available on YouTube, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zq6QMxAm3DU.
[13] For a thorough narrative of the current schism, see http://jihadology.net/2014/07/04/the-clear-banner-let-him-eat-leaves-north-caucasians-aligned-to-islamic-state-slam-caucasus-emirate-emir/.
[14] http://www.kavkazcenter.com/russ/content/2014/12/28/107502.shtml.
[15] For a thorough narrative of the rift, see http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=36725&cHash=8eed570ae3#.VNe0dZ3F_5I.