

THE ISLAMIC STATE COMES TO RUSSIA

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On June 23, 2015, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, the official spokesman of the Islamic State (IS) terrorist group, declared the formation of a new *wilayat*, or governorate, in Russia's North Caucasus.¹ The announcement was a watershed; as news agencies noted at the time, never before had the group made a territorial claim inside Russia. But it was also a sign of something bigger; al-Adnani's announcement came just days after reports that thousands of Islamic militants in Russia's restive regions of Dagestan, Chechnya, Ingushetia, and Kabardino-Balkaria—four provinces of the Caucasus Emirate, Russia's most potent *jihadi* group—had formally pledged allegiance to IS. In doing so, they echoed an earlier, December 2014 declaration by several of the Emirate's senior militants.²

Al-Adnani's June announcement was significant because it raised questions about the extent of the influence wielded by the Islamic State in Russia. But it was also notable because it hinted at the possibility of an end to the Caucasus Emirate (also known as Imarat Kavkaz, or IK).

Rise of the emirate

Russia's most prominent *jihadist* group finds its roots in the sectarian conflict that has raged in Russia's North Caucasus over the past two decades. That strife, in turn, is a product of the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the Kremlin's efforts to assert control over its increasingly unruly hinterlands.

To be sure, Moscow's problems with the North Caucasus are not a new phenomenon. Historically, the Russian government controlled the region, dominated by fiercely independent tribes and clans, through forcible relocations and expulsions. The



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peoples of the region, traditionally moderate Sufi and predominantly Chechen, Dagestani, and Circassian, resisted tsarist rule and periodically rebelled even after the Kremlin incorporated them into the Russian empire in the late 1800s. This, in turn, led to harsh repression from Moscow. Thus, in February of 1944, Soviet leader Josef Stalin deported approximately 1.4 million North Caucasians to Siberian Gulags under the false pretext of Nazi collaboration. Out of approximately a dozen nationalities that made up this group, the largest was the Chechens. The deportations were horrific and reshaped their identity: Chechens began to think of themselves as belonging to a distinct Chechen nationality, rather than a *teip* (clan).

When the USSR broke apart in 1991, following the example of other former Soviet holdings, local leader Dzhokhar Dudayev proclaimed an independent Chechen Republic of Ichkeria. Unlike in places like Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan, however, the declaration was greeted not with acquiescence from Moscow, but with armed opposition. At the time, Russian President Boris Yeltsin's advisors were convinced that denying Chechnya its independence was essential to preserving the integrity of the fledgling Russian Federation, and that the resulting military victory would bolster Yeltsin's failing presidency.³ This counsel proved terribly wrong; the war Moscow would subsequently fight with Chechnya was both costly and difficult for the Kremlin. On the Chechen side, meanwhile, it spurred a transformation of what was once a "nationalist cause into an Islamist one, with a *jihadi* component."⁴

After a brief, tenuous interregnum, the Kremlin declared a second war with Chechnya in 1999 following a series of apartment bombings in Moscow. Although questions remain to this day as to who was ultimately responsible for

the blasts, the Russian government was quick to blame the Chechens. The resulting war spilled into neighboring Dagestan, and while it formally concluded in 2000, Russian military occupation—and Islamist opposition—continued long thereafter.

In October 2007, Dokku Umarov, then the president of the Republic of Ichkeria, formally announced the establishment of the IK as an umbrella organization to unite militant *jamaats* (fighting units) in the North Caucasus. The agenda, however, was both local and global. "Our enemy is not Rusnya [Russia] only, but everyone who wages war against Islam and Muslims," Umarov declared at the time. Umarov's comment was a clear indicator of the increasingly transnational nature of Islamist ideology that had come to animate the Chechen resistance.⁵

Violence in the region continued to grow, and in April 2009, IK openly declared its allegiance to global *jihad*, pledging an oath to the premier international terrorist actor of the day, al-Qaeda.⁶ Less than a year later, in June 2010, the U.S. government recognized this shift when the State Department designated Umarov as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist under U.S. Executive Order 13224.⁷

But while the IK had global partners, it preferred to act locally. Umarov himself prioritized domestic targets over international ones, even though the latter would have been more consistent with al-Qaeda's approach. Moreover, the group funded itself primarily through local criminal activity and overwhelmingly targeted Russian government forces—although it also took credit for a number of high-profile attacks on civilians in Russia, such as the November 2009 bombing of Nevsky Express train, March 2010 suicide attack on the Moscow Metro, February 2011 attacks on Moscow's Domodedovo airport, and two suicide bombings in Volgograd in December 2013.

Thereafter, however, the IK's presence in Russia, and its pace of activity, was deeply affected by developments in the Middle East.

Ripples from the Syrian *jihad*

The Syrian uprising, which started in March 2011, quickly became a beacon for foreign *jihadists*, and Russian and Western press reports began periodically to note that there were Chechens fighting in Syria. Indeed, the complexion of Chechen Islamism was altered profoundly by the conflict underway in Syria—and by the lure of Islamist groups like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, which were active in that arena.

By late 2011 and early 2012, hundreds of foreign fighters—including large numbers from Russia and other parts of Eurasia—migrated to the Syrian battlefield. There, Chechen fighters quickly rose to the forefront of the Islamist opposition against Bashar al-Assad's regime; by 2013, at least three Syria-based *jihadi* groups were reportedly led by Chechen *emirs* from the North Caucasus—including one group led by Tarkhan Batirashvili (aka, Abu Omar al-Shishani), an ethnic Chechen from Georgia.⁸ These factions, like other Islamist elements in Syria and beyond, subsequently would be caught up in the escalating struggle for control over the Syrian opposition then playing out between al-Qaeda and its one-time affiliate.

In this ideological tug-of-war, the IK's loyalties lay with al-Qaeda, at least initially. The IK and ISIS differed significantly in terms of their ideology, their approaches to recruitment and violence, and their very structure. In terms of operation, too, the groups were dissimilar, with the IK operating as what regional expert Orkhan Dzamal has called a “night-time government” with a purely military structure, while IS

adopted a “day-time” approach and called on entire families to join them.⁹ This distance, however, would lessen over time.

An entry point for ISIS

In July 2014, IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi named Russia and the U.S. the two leading enemies of the Muslim world, both of whom are “mobilized by the Jews.”¹⁰ This appeared to be the first time that ISIS had given such importance to Russia.

The Islamic State's attention coincided with a marked decline in the IK's fortunes. In March 2014, Umarov was killed by Russian security forces. He was succeeded by Ali Abu Muhammad al-Dagestani, who became the IK's first non-Chechen leader and appeared to be an al-Qaeda supporter.¹¹ Al-Dagestani's reign, however, was short-lived; just a year later, he too was killed by Russian forces. His death, coupled with stepped-up counterterrorism measures on the part of the Russian government, reverberated through the IK. According to Russian expert Artur Ataev, the IK, post-Dagestani, “no longer had charismatic leaders and completely lost financing.” The reversal of fortune was profound, with the group unable to recruit new members and suffering from low morale.¹²

This diminution added greater appeal to the alternative Islamist narrative championed by the Islamic State, which progressively co-opted and supplanted the IK. Russian sources say that, since 2013, IS has carried out an extraordinarily effective propaganda campaign in Russia and neighboring countries, targeting Muslim youth with little education and feelings of disenfranchisement. In doing so, the group has played on underlying societal issues such as religious and ethnic profiling, discrimination, and continuous, often violent, harassment by the Russian security forces directed at ethnic minorities in Russia—all of which exacerbate feelings of resentment toward

the Russian state. Thus, according to a harrowing in-depth report by Svoboda, a Russian human rights watchdog, hundreds, if not thousands, of Chechens remain in Russian prisons on trumped-up charges, where Russian security services routinely subject them to horrific torture.¹³ Simultaneously, the rise of far-right nationalism and xenophobia in Russian society has contributed to feelings of rejection among Muslims in Russia. IS propaganda outlets have deftly highlighted these trends, using them as recruitment tools to generate hatred for the Russian state, and support for pan-Islamic ideas. At the same time, ISIS also skillfully plays on ideological sentiments to recruit individuals from successful, wealthy families who have no grievances against the Russian state.¹⁴

The effects have been profound. Russian has emerged as the third most popular language for ISIS propaganda after Arabic and English. According to Igor Malashenko of the Carnegie Moscow Center, IS spreads its message through “tens of thousands of internet accounts and sites,” including those in the Russian language such as the popular social media website Odnoklassniki, a Russia version of Facebook. According to Malashenko, these recruitment networks have become a de facto part of the “structure of all-Russian Islamism.”¹⁵ In 2015, IS even began publishing a magazine in Russian, *Istok* (Source).

They have also served as a tool of mobilization, with Russian Muslims indoctrinated by IS propaganda being propelled to leave the country and join the *jihad* in the Middle East. Estimates of the number of North Caucasian fighters in Syria and Iraq vary dramatically—from several hundred to several thousand. Shortly before Russia’s Syria intervention, the Russian government claimed that between 2,000 and 5,000 militants had joined ISIS; weeks after the entry of Russia into the conflict, how-

ever, that figure jumped to 7,000 from the former Soviet Union, with the majority of them Russian citizens.¹⁶

It is difficult to ascertain the veracity of the Russian government’s claims. Furthermore, it is unclear if all Chechens fighting in Syria and Iraq came directly from the region, rather than from the diaspora in Europe, or if all of them are necessarily fighting for the Islamic State. The lore of Chechens as fierce fighters in the Middle East makes it harder to separate truth from fiction, according to knowledgeable journalists who report from Syria on ISIS. Nonetheless, the anecdotal evidence is unmistakable: IS is exerting growing influence over Russia’s Muslims and their counterparts in Central Asia. Russia’s Syria intervention, meanwhile, has only served to increase anti-Russian sentiment among the country’s Muslims, many of whom already felt disenfranchised as a result of Moscow’s policies.¹⁷

Failed policy

Many questions still remain about the actual number of Russian Muslims within the Islamic State and other radical groups now active in Syria and Iraq. Nonetheless, it is clear that the Islamic State’s influence within Russia itself is growing. This could change if another radical group rises in prominence, or if the Islamic State declines. But the fact that Russia’s Muslim community is now a receptive audience for radical Islamist ideas writ large is apparent.

So is the fact that Russian authorities have been delinquent with their response. As a recent exposé by *Novaya Gazeta*, one of the very few remaining independent newspapers in Russia, noted, Russia’s various intelligence services have had a hand in aiding Islamist militants to join the *jihad* in Syria.¹⁸ They have done so because, to the Kremlin, the practice of driving militants out of Russia remains preferable to addressing

the true causes of radicalization—the societal and economic inequality that has contributed to Muslim alienation.

These socioeconomic factors have now been compounded by political ones. The Russian government's decision in recent months to intervene in Syria is likely to have a further radicalizing effect on the country's Muslims, resulting in their joining radical groups, whether IS or others, in ever greater numbers.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has styled himself as a leader in the fight against global terrorism. Yet the majority of air strikes carried out to date by Russian forces in Syria have been directed not against IS, but against all manner of armed opponents of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, including those supported by the West. This intervention has further increased the already massive flow of Sunni refugees and provided still greater grounds for radicalization and instability in the region. Under these circumstances, it is difficult to see the Kremlin as a reliable partner—let alone a leader—in the war on terrorism. Instead, it appears to be a driver of instability and radicalization within its own country, and far beyond.



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