



THE FUTURE OF
CHECHENS
IN ISIS

Anna Borschevskaya

Executive Summary

Russia is now third among top countries from which ISIS receives its recruits. The majority come from the North Caucasus, but also increasingly from Central Asia. The most prominent North Caucasians among the ISIS ranks have been the Chechens. While the Chechens have a reputation of being fierce warriors who fought the Russian state for twenty years, the majority have come from the Chechen diaspora and did not participate in war prior to joining ISIS. Nonetheless, a number of North Caucasian fighters in the ISIS ranks, including Chechens, have stood out. This report includes profiles of several of these individuals. While the Russian government routinely says it faces the same terrorist struggle as the West, the radicalization among Russia's Muslims is rooted in Russia's mistreatment of these people, which has a history that spans roughly 200 years.

Until very recently, Russia's Muslims who radicalized did not see themselves as part of the global terrorist struggle. Rather, they saw the Russian government as their main enemy. Their cause was different and more limited. Many who traveled to Syria wanted to fight the Russian government, but Russia's policies, especially in the run-up to the 2014 Sochi Olympics, also encouraged many North Caucasians to leave Russia for Syria, thus contributing to global terrorism, rather than fighting it. ISIS continues to decline, but the ideology will remain, and the Russian government has not addressed the root causes that led to radicalization in Russia in the first place. Most North Caucasians fighting for ISIS are unlikely to return to Russia. Instead, they are more likely to come to Europe. But it doesn't take many individuals to create acts of terrorism. Until the Russian government changes its approach, Russia will continue to be a source of instability, and an inadvertent contributor to terrorism, rather than a fighter of it.

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Anna Borchevskaya: The Future of Chechens in ISIS

Introduction

In recent years, Russia has emerged as third among the top five countries from which ISIS receives its recruits.¹ Most fighters come from Russia's restless North Caucasus, and increasingly also from Central Asia. This trend has been long in the making.

On 23 June 2015, official ISIS spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani declared the formation of a new *wilayat*, or governorate, in Russia's North Caucasus.² The announcement marked a turning point. Never before had ISIS made a territorial claim inside Russia, as press reports noted at the time. Al-Adnani's announcement came just days after reports that thousands of Islamic militants in Dagestan, Chechnya, Ingushetia, and Kabardino-Balkaria – four declared provinces of the Caucasus Emirate, Russia's main jihadist group – had formally pledged allegiance to ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria). In doing so, these fighters echoed a December 2014 declaration of allegiance to ISIS by several of the Emirate's senior militants.³

Al-Adnani's June 2015 announcement raised questions about the extent of ISIS influence in Russia. It also hinted at the possibility of an end to the Caucasus Emirate (also known as Imarat Kavkaz, or IK), or at least signaled IK's decline. While the Emirate's decline had been visible before, Al Adnani's announcement highlighted the decline more definitively. As these trends continue, what is next for the North Caucasian fighters in ISIS, and for Russia?

¹ Екатерина Сокирянская, “Абу Мясо. Так в ИГИЛ прозвали чеченского командира, отправляющего своих бойцов на смерть,” *Novaya Gazeta*, 20 May 2016,

<https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2016/05/11/68546-abu-myaso-tak-v-igil-prozvali-chechenskogo-komandira-otpravlyayuschego-svoih-boytsov-na-smert>

Ian Bremmer, “The Top 5 Countries Where ISIS Gets Its Foreign Recruits,” *Time*, 13 April 2017,

<http://time.com/4739488/isis-iraq-syria-tunisia-saudi-arabia-russia/>.

² Harleen Gambhir, “ISIS Declares Governorate in Russia's North Caucasus,” Institute for the Study of War, 23 June 2015, <http://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/isis-declares-governorate-russia%E2%80%99s-north-caucasus-region#sthash.r2anmNPY.dpuf>

³ Meredith Hoffman, “Caucasus Emirate Militants Pledge Allegiance to the Islamic State in a Video,” *VICE*, 20 December 2014.

<https://news.vice.com/article/caucasus-emirate-militants-pledge-allegiance-to-the-islamic-state-in-new-video>;

“Russia's Caucasus Islamists ‘pledge allegiance’ to ISIS,” *Agence France-Presse*, 24 July 2015,

<http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/World/2015/Jun-24/303595-russias-caucasus-islamists-pledge-allegiance-to-isis.ashx#sthash.9nZXucQd.dpuf>

“Six North Caucasus Insurgency Commanders Transfer Allegiance To Islamic State,” *Radio Free*

Europe/Radio Liberty, 2 January 2015, <http://www.rferl.org/content/islamic-state-north-caucasus-insurgency-commanders-allegiance/26773615.html>.

Rise and Decline of the Emirate

The Caucasus Emirate originates in the sectarian conflict that has raged in Russia's North Caucasus for a little more than two decades as a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Kremlin's subsequent efforts to control its increasingly unruly hinterlands.

The present conflict is actually the latest chapter of a struggle spanning more than two centuries between Moscow and the fiercely independent tribes and clans of the North Caucasus. The peoples of this region are traditionally moderate Sufi and predominantly Chechen, Dagestani, and Circassian. They always resisted tsarist rule and periodically rebelled even after the Kremlin incorporated them into the Russian empire in the late 1800s. Rebellions tended to arise at times when the Kremlin was weak domestically, and Moscow always responded with harsh repression.

Moscow also historically questioned the loyalty of the North Caucasians and feared rebellion from the region and controlled it through expulsions and forcible relocations. In February 1944, Soviet premier Josef Stalin summarily rounded up and deported approximately 1.4 million people from this region to the Siberian gulags under a false pretext of Nazi collaboration. Out of approximately a dozen nationalities that comprised this group, the largest was the Chechens. The deportations were horrific and at least a third of those involved died along the way. Survivors were not allowed to return until 1956, after Stalin's death, only to find their homes taken by strangers. The importance of this event cannot be overstated. The experience of deportation altered group identities: Chechens began to think of themselves as belonging to a distinct Chechen nationality, rather than a *teip*, or clan, as they had previously.⁴

When the Soviet Union fell apart in 1991, many former Soviet holdings declared and received independence. In 1991, speaking at in the predominantly Muslim Tatarstan, Russian President Boris Yeltsin told regional leaders to "take as much sovereignty as you can swallow."⁵ A year later Tatarstan held a referendum on independence (despite Moscow's attempts to prevent it), and granted Tatarstan autonomy within the Russian Federation.

In this context, local leader Dzhokhar Dudayev proclaimed an independent Chechen Republic of Ichkeria in November 1991. But in this case Moscow met the declaration with armed opposition. At the time, Yeltsin's advisors were convinced that denying Chechnya its independence was essential to preserving the integrity of the fledgling Russian state, and that the resulting

⁴ See Svante E. Cornell, "The 'Afghanization' of the North Caucasus: Causes and Implications in a changing conflict," in Stephen J. Blank, ed., *Russia's Homegrown Insurgency: Jihad in the North Caucasus* (Carlisle Barracks, Pa.: US Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, 2012), p. 126.

⁵ Steven Erlanger, "Tatars Vote on a Referendum All Agree Is Confusing," *New York Times*, 22 March 1992 <http://www.nytimes.com/1992/03/22/world/tatars-vote-on-a-referendum-all-agree-is-confusing.html>

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military victory, which they were sure would be quick and easy, would boost Yeltsin's failing presidency.⁶ Thus, Moscow went to war with Chechnya in December 1994. That year Chechens had been commemorating the 50th anniversary of Stalin's deportations with many signs throughout Grozny, Chechnya's capital. The Russian army didn't wait for the commemorations to end, and the signs were among its first targets.⁷ This is an important element of the war that speaks volumes of Russia's relationship with this region.

The fighting ended in August 1996, but Yeltsin's advisors had been very wrong; the war had proved both costly and difficult for Moscow. On the Chechen side, it also transformed a "nationalist cause into an Islamist one, with a jihadi component," according to the International Crisis Group.⁸ Writing about this transformation, Israeli author Ya'ov Karny highlighted Moscow's historic efforts to erase the very memory of Chechens as a people as part of its struggle with the region. "The Chechen independence struggle, begun in increments in 1990, was born in the shadow of this partial amnesia, which is why it proved easy prey to foreign Islamic militants whose espousal of the Chechen cause is a mere subterfuge for the imposition of their own intolerant and aggressive theological dogma."⁹

In October 2007, Dokku Umarov, then the president of the declared 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.¹⁰

The Kremlin for its part declared a second war with Chechnya in 1999 following a series of apartment bombings in Moscow. Although questions remain to this day about 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 with the Russian army razing Grozny to the ground,¹¹ Russian military occupation

⁶ [Rajan Menon](http://bostonreview.net/rajan-menon-chechnya-russia), "Russia's Quagmire: On ending the standoff in Chechnya," *Boston Review*, 1 June 2004 <http://bostonreview.net/rajan-menon-chechnya-russia>.

⁷ Yo'av Karny, "Chechen Nightmare, Russian Amnesia. Memories of a Day No One Should Forget," *Washington Post*, 20 February 2000

⁸ "The North Caucasus: The Challenges of Integration (I), Ethnicity and Conflict," International Crisis Group, *Europe Report* No. 220, 19 October 2012, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/europe/north-caucasus/220-the-north-caucasus-the-challenges-of-integration-i-ethnicity-and-conflict.aspx>.

⁹ Yo'av Karny, "Chechen Nightmare, Russian Amnesia. Memories of a Day No One Should Forget," *Washington Post*, 20 February 2000, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/WPcap/2000-02/20/001r-022000-idx.html>

¹⁰ "Imarat Kavkaz/Caucasus Emirate," IHS Jane's World Insurgency and Terrorism, 2014, https://www.ih.com/pdf/IHS-Janes-World-Insurg-Terror_Imarat-Kavkaz_146073110913052132.pdf.

¹¹ Ian Traynor, "Russia Set to Destroy Grozny," *The Guardian*, 12 November 1999, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/1999/nov/13/chechnya.iantraynorhttps://www.theguardian.com/world/1999/nov/13/chechnya.iantraynor>

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and Islamist opposition continued until 2009. During this period, Vladimir Putin installed the Kadyrov family, former anti-Kremlin insurgents who switched sides, to be in charge of Chechnya.

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.¹² Less than a year later, in June 2010, the US State Department recognized this shift by designating Umarov a Specially Designated Global Terrorist under US Executive Order 13224.¹³

But while the IK had global partners, it preferred to act locally. Indeed, scholar Elena Pokalova of the US National Defense University wrote that “much of the independent evidence suggests that links between Al Qaeda and North Caucasus insurgents have been tactical and operational at best. No clear evidence suggests a merger between the two at the strategic level. Further, no evidence suggests that the groups pursued the same goals.”¹⁴ 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 in Russia, such as a November 2009 bombing of a Nevsky Express train, a 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. After the Syrian uprising started in March 2011 – a peaceful protest that quickly radicalized in no small part because of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, who injected radicals into the protest movement – 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.

James Rodgers, “Chechnya: Destruction defying description,” *BBC*, 7 June 2000,

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/780073.stm>

¹² “Caucasus Emirate,” Mapping Militant Organizations, Stanford University, 11 April 2014,

<http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/255>.

¹³ US Department of State, Bureau of Public Affairs, “Designation of Caucasus Emirate,” 26 May 2011,

<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2011/05/164312.htm>. “In the Matter of the Designation of Rustam Aselderov, aka Abu Mukhammad al-Kadar, aka Abu Mukhammad Kadarsky, aka Abu Mukhammad Kadarskiy, aka Abu Mohammad al-Qadari, aka Abu Muhammad al-Kadarskii, aka Rustam Asildarov, aka Rustam Aseldarov as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist Pursuant to Section 1(b) of Executive Order 13224, as Amended,” *Federal Register*, 1 October 2015,

<https://www.federalregister.gov/articles/2015/10/01/2015-25043/in-the-matter-of-the-designation-of-rustam-aselderov-aka-abu-mukhammad-al-kadar-aka-abu-mukhammad>.

¹⁴ Elena Pokalova, “The Al Qaeda Brand: The strategic Use of the ‘terrorist’ label,” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, DOI: 10.1080/09546553.2016.1169175 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2016.1169175>

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By late 2011 and early 2012, hundreds of foreign fighters – including 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. Chechens had a reputation as fierce fighters, which helped them rise through the ranks. By 2013, at least three Syria-based jihadist groups were reportedly led by Chechen *emirs* from the North Caucasus.¹⁵ These factions, like other Islamist elements in Syria and beyond, would subsequently be caught up in the escalating struggle for control over the Syrian opposition then playing out between al-Qaeda and its one-time affiliate.

IK’s loyalties lay with al-Qaeda, at least initially. The IK and ISIS differed significantly in their ideologies, their approaches to recruitment and violence, and their very structures. The IK’s new leader, Magomed Suleymanov, reportedly was angry at the excesses of IS, seeing public beheadings and other acts of wanton violence perpetrated by the group as “unnecessary.” Operationally, too, the groups were dissimilar, with the IK operating as what regional expert Orkhan Dzemal 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 it. Such distinctions, however, wouldn’t remain.

In July 2014, IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi named Russia and the US the two leading enemies of the Muslim world, insisting that both were “mobilized by the Jews.”¹⁶ This appeared to be the first time that ISIS had given such importance to Russia, and it coincided with a decline of the Emirate. In March 2014, Russian security forces killed Umarov. 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.¹⁷ Russian forces killed him only a year later. 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. The group was unable to recruit new members and suffered from low morale.¹⁸

¹⁵ Subcommittee Hearing: “Assessing Terrorism in the Caucasus and the Threat to the Homeland Counterterrorism and Intelligence Subcommittee,” 311 Cannon House Office Building, 13. April 2014 <https://homeland.house.gov/hearing/subcommitte-hearing-assessing-terrorism-caucasus-and-threat-homeland/>

Alan Cullison, “Meet the Rebel Commander in Syria That Assad, Russia and the U.S. All Fear,” *Wall Street Journal*, 19 November 2013, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702303309504579181962177007316>.

¹⁶ Andrei Ostalskiy, “Халифат все ближе,” *Radio Svoboda*, 21 October 2015, <http://www.svoboda.org/content/article/26644660.html>.

¹⁷ “Caucasus Emirate,” Mapping Militant Organizations. Bill Roggio and Thomas Joscelyn, “[Russian troops kill leader of Islamic Caucasus Emirate](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/04/russian-troops-kill-leader-of-islamic-caucasus-emirate.php),” *Long War Journal*, 19 April 2015, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/04/russian-troops-kill-leader-of-islamic-caucasus-emirate.php>.

¹⁸ “ИГИЛ угрожает России: чего ждать от террористов, которые вернутся на Кавказ,” *Moskovsky Komsomolets* (Moscow), 29 October 2015, <http://www.mk.ru/politics/2015/10/29/igil-ugrozhaet-rossii-cheho-zhdet-ot-terroristov-kotorye-vernutsya-na-kavkaz.html>.

Russian-Language Speakers in ISIS

This situation added to the appeal of the ISIS narrative in Russia. The Islamic State's military victories in the context of IK decline did not go unnoticed by Muslims in the North Caucasus. Since 2013, Russian officials say, ISIS 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 towards the Russian state. According to a harrowing in-depth report by Svoboda, a Russian human rights watchdog, hundreds and possibly thousands of Chechens are held in Russian prisons on trumped-up charges, where Russian security services routinely subject them to torture.¹⁹ Simultaneously, the rise of far-right nationalism and xenophobia in Russian society has contributed to feelings of rejection among Muslims in Russia.

The effects have been profound. Russian has emerged as the third most popular language for ISIS propaganda after Arabic and English. Indeed, ISIS began publishing a magazine in Russian, called *Istok* (The Source).²⁰ 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.”²¹

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, however, that figure jumped to 7,000 out of a total of approximately 30,000 foreign fighters active within the ranks of the Islamic State.

Independent experts tend to agree that it is difficult to ascertain the veracity of these claims, and that the Russian government inflates the numbers.²² Ultimately, no one truly knows how many Russian-language speakers and

¹⁹ Amina Umarova, “Если на земле есть ад, то я – в этом аду,” Radio Svoboda, 4 October 2010, <http://www.svoboda.org/content/article/27286075.html>.

²⁰ *Istok* is available from: <http://jihadology.net/category/istok-magazine/>

²¹ “Эксперт: Вербовочная сеть ИГИЛ в России уже превратилась в устойчивую структуру,” *RosBalt*, 12 October 2015, <http://www.rosbalt.ru/main/2015/10/12/1450165.html>.

²² Anecdotally, for example, some Chechens who lived through the Chechen wars remember that at the very height of the Chechen insurgency against Moscow there were, in their estimation, no more than 2,000 fighters in all of Chechnya fighting Moscow. Based on author conversation with Sufian Zhemukhov, Senior Research Associate at PONARS, Eurasia, 23 March 2017, Washington, D.C.

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Russian citizens are fighting for ISIS – not even ISIS. Many Chechens fighting in Syria and Iraq came from the diaspora in Europe, and not all of them necessarily to fight for the Islamic State. Another factor is that many who leave Russia to join ISIS leave with their families, since ISIS presents itself as a state enterprise, so not everyone who leaves participates in fighting. Indeed, according to recent press reports ISIS prevents widows and children of deceased fighters from returning home, claiming they are the property of the Islamic State.²³ While Chechens continue to enjoy an international reputation of fierce warriors who fought the Russian government for over twenty years, the majority who came to Syria did not fight in the first or second Chechen wars. Furthermore, many in the Middle East tend to assume that a Russian speaker in the ISIS ranks is a Chechen, but that need not be so.

While accurate figures may be elusive, the anecdotal evidence is unmistakable: ISIS is exerting a growing influence on Russia's Muslims and on their counterparts in Central Asia. Many North Caucasians, including Russian citizens, have indeed joined the Islamic State. 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.²⁴

To be more precise, North Caucasian fighters have come to the Islamic State in two waves. Between 2011-2013 they were primarily from the European diaspora. Many were related to Chechens who fought in the first or second Chechen war. They came to Syria because they couldn't fight in the North Caucasus, according to Jean-François Ratelle, assistant professor at Ottawa University and a North Caucasus expert. During these years, he writes, IK militants and Salafists in the North Caucasus saw Russia as the real enemy. The second wave began in late 2013, when many North Caucasians from Russia began travelling to Syria and Iraq. These people were ideologically driven and preferred "the utopian views of the Islamic State" rather than the fight in the North Caucasus.²⁵

Some experts, as reported by *The Telegraph*, believe ISIS "fields at least three exclusively Russian-speaking 'Caucasian' battalions of about 150 men each. Often led by Chechens, the rank and file of these battalions is believed to have been drawn from across the north Caucasus and other parts of the former Soviet Union."²⁶ A number of these individuals, according to the report, live in Mosul, where they enjoy a degree of autonomy. Until recently, they also retained access to hard-to-obtain consumer goods. Chechen nationalism within ISIS remains strong. Thus, reportedly, when Chechen ISIS fighters capture

²³ Joanna Paraszczuk, "'Your Kids Belong To IS,' Militants Tell Tajik Widow," *RFE/RL*, 13 May 2015. <http://www.rferl.org/a/islamic-state-tajik-widow-syria-children/27013281.html>

²⁴ "Противники авиаударов по Сирии из числа жителей Кавказа опасаются жертв среди мирного населения," *Kavkazskiy Uzel*, 9 October 2015, <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/270315/>.

²⁵ Jean-François Ratelle (2016), "North Caucasian foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq: assessing the threat of returnees to the Russian Federation," *Caucasus Survey*, 4:3, 218-238, DOI: 10.1080/23761199.2016.1234096

²⁶ Roland Oliphant, "'Your son has become a Martyr': The Russian fighters from Dagestan rising up the ranks of Islamic State," *The Telegraph*, 30 July 2016.

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another Chechen, they torture him less cruelly than someone of another ethnicity, so he has a higher chance of survival.²⁷

Russia's Policies: Encouraging Fighters to Leave

As a number of credible press reports have indicated, Russia's various intelligence services have actually aided Islamic militants in joining the jihad in Syria, typically via Turkey.²⁸ Turkey is the ideal transit point because it already has a large North Caucasian diaspora, a porous border with Syria, visa-free entry, and a large flow of tourists that allows these people to blend in easily.²⁹ By 2013-2014, before the Sochi Olympics but during the war in Ukraine, "law enforcement began to virtually physically expel Salafis to Syria, telling them, 'Go there and die there.'" ³⁰ Many people in the region truly wanted to fight, and saw an opportunity "to realize themselves in this struggle," while others didn't go to fight but rather settled in certain neighborhoods and suburbs of Istanbul, where many Russian-speaking migrants lived.³¹

To the Kremlin, the practice of driving militants out of Russia both echoes Russia's historic methods of dealing with problems (and thereby exacerbating them), and remains preferable to addressing the true causes of radicalization in the Russian context – the societal and economic inequality that has contributed to Muslim alienation.³² The practice of encouraging people to leave for Syria was especially widespread in the run-up to the Sochi Olympic Games, which Putin wanted to go without a terrorist incident.

The games were symbolic for several reasons. Putin held games in Sochi on the 150th anniversary of the tsarist war, massacre and deportations of Circassians that occurred at the same site – though the Kremlin denies any connection. It was another case of Russia's erasing of memory. The games both spurred peaceful protest and encouraged radicals to take up the Circassian cause in the name of their own ideology, independent of much real concern for the plight of Circassians. Furthermore, the government for the first time banned the commemoration of Stalin's deportations of the Chechens. The commemoration was to fall on the last day of the Sochi Olympics, 23 February. Earlier, the Chechen government, headed by Ramzan Kadyrov, had ordered a demolition of a memorial to the deportations.³³

²⁷ Екатерина Сокирянская, "Абу Мясо. Так в ИГИЛ прозвали чеченского командира, отправляющего своих бойцов на смерть," *Novaya Gazeta*, 20 May 2016
<https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2016/05/11/68546-abu-myaso-tak-v-igil-prozvali-chechenskogo-komandira-otpravlyayuschego-svoih-boytsov-na-smert>

²⁸ Michael Weiss, "Russia is Sending Jihadis to Join ISIS," *The Daily Beast*, 23 August 2015,
<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/08/23/russia-s-playing-a-double-game-with-islamic-terror0.html>.

²⁹ Denis Sokolov, forthcoming report.

³⁰ Denis Sokolov, forthcoming report.

³¹ Denis Sokolov, forthcoming report.

³² Broadly speaking, individuals certainly radicalize even when not alienated by the state, but in Russia, the authorities' treatment of Muslims has been the primary issue.

³³ Valery Dzutsati, "Official Grozny Fails to Mark 70th Anniversary of the Chechen Deportations,"

Profiles of Several Fighters

Experts note that many Russian citizens in the ISIS's ranks have come to realize that their future is bleak. "[T]hey will be forced to defend themselves until the end," wrote Maaz Bilalov for RFE/RL's Caucasus site, Kavkaz.Realii, in November 2016.³⁴ "They are going to die ... they know that, that's why they're fighting to the end," said Vera Mironova in a telephone interview with the author in March of this year. Mironova is a pre-doctoral research fellow in the Belfer Center's International Security Program and a Ph.D. candidate in political science at the University of Maryland. Her research explores individual-level behavior in conflict environments and she has conducted fieldwork in many conflicts, from Bosnia to Yemen. Mironova told me these individuals are also disillusioned. "Everything they came for is not happening, [there's] no Islam," she said, referring to a vast gap between the Islamic state they imagined and one they have experienced.³⁵

It's difficult to find accurate details about Chechens or other North Caucasians fighting for various Islamist groups in the Middle East. Those who have been killed, or who hold senior positions, tend to be the exceptions.³⁶ Below are several profiles of such individuals. Together, they demonstrate a complex picture of different motivations and loyalties towards Islamist groups.

Omar al-Shishani ("Omar the Chechen," or "Abu Meat")

Tarkhan Tayumurazovich Batirashvili, known by his nom de guerre Omar Al-Shishani (the Chechen), was the most famous North Caucasian fighter in ISIS, and held the position of war minister. Tarkhan was born to an ethnic Georgian and Orthodox Christian father and a Muslim Kist (ethnic Chechen of the Melkhi clan) mother. The Kist people are a subgroup of Georgia's Pankisi Gorge, Tarkhan converted to Islam and was radicalized after fighting in the 2008 Russo-Georgian war. He was wounded in Shaddadi, Syria, as a result of US air strikes and died of his wounds on 4 March 2016.³⁷

Al-Shishani had come to Syria in about 2012 and served in command positions in different militant Islamist groups. In an interview with the BBC in July 2014, Omar's father said his son actually left home because his family was poor,

Eurasia Daily Monitor, Volume 11, Issue 42, 5 March 2014.

http://www.jamestown.org/regions/thecaucasus/single/?tx_ttnews%5Bpointer%5D=4&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=42045&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=639&cHash=20fae6f93ccf34d461a6379fc38d9c90#.Vx0N5zArJ3I

³⁴ Maaz Bilalov, "Последний бастион," *Kavkazr.com*, 29 November 2016, <http://www.kavkazr.com/a/posledniy-bastion/28146313.html>

³⁵ Author telephone interview with Vera Mironova, 17 March 2017.

³⁶ Maaz Bilalov, "Последний бастион," *Kavkazr.com*, 29 November 2016, <http://www.kavkazr.com/a/posledniy-bastion/28146313.html>

³⁷ Eric Schmidt and Michael S. Schmidt, "Omar the Chechen, a Senior Leader in ISIS, Dies After U.S. Airstrike," *New York Times*, 15 March 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/15/world/middleeast/omar-chechen-isis-killed-us-airstrike-syria.html?ref=world&_r=0

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though his stated reason was his new-found religion. But his father thought money was not the reason his son remained in Syria.³⁸ He doesn't say what the real reason was, though the context of the interview suggests it was likely that radical ideology had taken over.

Al-Shishani joined ISIS in 2013 and quickly rose through its ranks. He commanded Katibat al-Aqsa – the most famous Chechen brigade within ISIS.³⁹ On 24 September 2014 The US Treasury Department added al-Shishani to its [Specially Designated Global Terrorists](#) list and several months later announced a reward up to USD 5 million for information leading to his capture. Even within ISIS al-Shishani was somewhat of a mystery, according to press reports. He had a reputation as a fierce warrior yet gained the nickname “Abu Meat” for sending young men to die from behind a desk. He also excelled at recruitment. His death thus reportedly meant a reduction in ISIS's recruitment capabilities.

Akhmad Chataev (Akhmad Shishani, “Akhmad the One Armed”)

Akhmad Chataev, nom de guerre Akhmad Shishani, or Akhmad the One Armed, was born in Vedeno in Chechnya's Vedesny District and reportedly participated in the insurgency against the Russian government that began in the 1990s. The Russian authorities captured and tortured him. Chataev is missing an arm and a foot, which explains the epithet “One Armed” and variations of it. Chataev reportedly claimed that Russian authorities had chopped off his arm in prison as part of torture that also included electric shocks, though the veracity of his claim is impossible to ascertain.⁴⁰

He has subsequently been wanted by the Russian government for perpetrating terrorist acts. According to press reports Chataev left Russia either in 2001 or 2004 for Western Europe, where he was arrested several times, and in the fall 2012 Georgian authorities arrested him as a member of an armed group that had clashed earlier that year with Georgian troops at Lopota Gorge, close to the Russian border, though he was soon acquitted. In 2015 he appeared in ISIS territory and in October 2015 the US and UN designated him as a terrorist.⁴¹ According to one reported YouTube Video, Chataev pledged allegiance to ISIS in February 2015 and began working on training and recruitment as commander of the Yarmouk Battalion, the second most well-known Chechen battalions within ISIS.⁴² *Georgia Journal* wrote in January 2015 that “[a]ccording

³⁸ Nina Akhmeteli, “The Georgian roots of Isis commander Omar al-Shishani,” BBC, July 2014.

<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-28217590>

³⁹ Joanna Paraszczuk, “Russian Citizen Linked To Lopota Gorge Incident Now Heads IS Battalion In Syria,” *RFE/RL*, 25 February 2015, <http://www.rferl.org/a/russia-lopota-gorge-incident-islamic-state-syria/26869379.html>

⁴⁰ William Watkinson, “One-armed Chechen warlord Akhmed Chataev reportedly behind Ataturk massacre,” *International Business Times*, 30 June 2016, <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/istanbul-airport-attack-one-armed-akhmed-chataev-reportedly-behind-aturk-massacre-1568359>

⁴¹ Akhmad Chataev profile, Counter Extremism Project, <https://www.counterextremism.com/extremists/akhmed-chatayev>.

⁴² Joanna Paraszczuk, “Russian Citizen Linked To Lopota Gorge Incident Now Heads IS Battalion In Syria,” *RFE/RL*, 25 February 2015, <http://www.rferl.org/a/russia-lopota-gorge-incident-islamic-state->

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to a trustworthy source from Istanbul, it is precisely Chataev who oversees the transit of young recruits from Pankisi [Georgia] to Syria. It is also said that he gets paid \$1,000 for every recruit he manages to hook in.”⁴³ Recent press reports indicated Chataev commanded at least 130 men within the Islamic State.⁴⁴ Reportedly Chataev was the mastermind behind a major Istanbul airport bombing in June 2016 that resulted in at least 40 deaths and 240 injuries.

Salahuddin al-Shishani

Payzulla Margoshvili, nom de guerre Salahuddin al-Shishani, is far less known than his fellow Kist Chechen, Omar al-Shishani. In 2012, Doku Umarov sent Salahuddin al-Shishani to Syria as his representative to gain military experience and gain valuable contacts. He first joined Jaish al-Muhajreen wa al-Ansar (JMA) – a group that Omar al-Shishani created and once headed and that analysts have described as Caucasus Emirate’s branch in Syria.⁴⁵

When Omar al-Shishani joined ISIS in spring 2013, Salahuddin al-Shishani took the reins in running the group, but was ousted from the group in June 2015.⁴⁶ JMA briefly aligned with ISIS, but quickly took an increasingly anti-ISIS stance and formally pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda in September 2015. Most Russian citizens moved to other groups. Salahuddin meanwhile was ousted from his position in a internal leadership struggle and proclaimed himself a leader of a subgroup of JMA, Imarat Kavkaz v Shame (Imarat Kavkas in Sham), but the group fell apart in June 2015. Russia’s *Novaya Gazeta* reports that his new group, Jaish al-Usra, fought together with Kurds in Sheikh Masoud in February 2016.⁴⁷

Though the US State Department has designed JMA as a terrorist organization, Joanna Parasczuk wrote that there is no record of this group kidnaping

[syria/26869379.html](#)

⁴³ “‘Ahmed One Arm’ – The man who sends Jihadists From Pankisi to Syria,” *Georgian Journal*, 31 January 2015. <http://www.georgianjournal.ge/military/29509-ahmed-one-arm-the-man-who-sends-jihadists-from-pankisi-to-syria.html>

⁴⁴ William Watkinson, “One-armed Chechen warlord Akhmed Chataev reportedly behind Ataturk massacre,” *International Business Times*, 30 June 2016, <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/istanbul-airport-attack-one-armed-akhmed-chataev-reportedly-behind-ataturk-massacre-1568359>

Fionn Hargreaves, “Freed to Kill. One-armed ISIS warlord behind Istanbul massacre ‘was due to be sent to Russia on terror charges... but court ruled it breached his human rights,’” *The Sun*, 1 July 2016, <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/1375182/one-armed-isis-warlord-behind-istanbul-massacre-was-due-to-be-sent-to-russia-on-terror-charges-but-court-ruled-it-breached-his-human-rights/>.

⁴⁵ Bill Roggio, “[Jaish al Muhajireen wal Ansar leader accuses Islamic State of creating ‘fitna’ between jihadist groups](#),” *The Long War Journal*, 28 May 2015, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/05/jaish-al-muhajireen-wal-ansar-leader-accuses-islamic-state-of-creating-fitna-between-jihadist-groups.php>

⁴⁶ Joanna Parasczuk, “Saahuddin Shishani in New Video Address: ‘Our Position Will Remain as Before,’” *ChechensinSyria.com*, 26 September 2015, <http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=24157#more-24157>

⁴⁷ Екатерина Сокирянская “Абу Мясо. Так в ИГИЛ прозвали чеченского командира, отправляющего своих бойцов на смерть,” *Novaya Gazeta*, 20 May 2016 <https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2016/05/11/68546-abu-myaso-tak-v-igil-prozvali-chechenskogo-komandira-otpravlyayuschego-svoih-boytsov-na-smert>

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foreigners or killing civilians, and the group instead focused on fighting Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime in Aleppo, primarily north-western Aleppo. While it would have been accurate to designate the group as a terrorist organization when it fought with ISIS under Omar al-Shishani's leadership, the group weakened significantly after he left and the description of terrorist no longer applies.⁴⁸

Abdul Khakim Shishani

Rustam Azhiev, nom de guerre Abdul Khakim Shishani, is the leader of Khalifa Jamaat in Latakia. According to Joanna Paraszczuk, a long-time observer and chronicler of information about Chechens in Syria, he is interesting because unlike most Chechens in Syria Abdul Khakim Shishani is a veteran of the Russo-Chechen war, and couldn't return to Chechnya because of an injury. Nohchicho, an independent Chechen website,⁴⁹ published an interview with him in February 2017 in which he stated that his group has never had any connection to ISIS. Earlier, he published a letter on the same site on the anniversary of Stalin's deportations of Chechens. "The occupying powers and their dogs are using all their strength to erase that crime [Stalin's deportations], that date, from our memory," he wrote. "Today, what Stalin did to an entire people, they continue to do to the families of mujahideen. They will not cease in this, because this is a war against all Muslims. May Allah save us from this and strengthen us in Islam."⁵⁰

Abu Jihad

Islam Seit-Umarovich Atabiyev, nom de guerre Abu Jihad, is an ethnic Karachay from Karachay-Cherkessia in the North Caucasus, and reportedly was a close friend of Omar al-Shishani.⁵¹ "While Abu Jihad does not appear to have taken part in any military action on behalf of IS, in 2013 and 2014 he was frequently seen alongside Umar Shishani and has since become a prominent ideologue within IS's North Caucasian contingent. More recently, he has begun reaching out to jihadis in Syria and the Russian Federation via regular Russian-language audio lectures on the Zello platform," wrote Paraszczuk on 21 April 2015. Abu Jihad has rejected Imarat Kavkaz and instead placed himself firmly in the pro-ISIS camp.

In April 2015, Abu Jihad made what Paraszczuk described as a "bold attempt at control and domination of the Islamist insurgency in the North Caucasus as well as of Russian-speaking jihadis in Syria." He made a video address calling on jihadis in the North Caucasus to join groups that pledged allegiances to ISIS, rather than the Caucasus Emirate. This move "should be viewed as the latest development in the ongoing and increasingly fierce power struggle

⁴⁸ Joanna Paraszczuk, "Saahuddin Shishani in New Video Address: 'Our Position Will Remain as Before,'" *ChechensinSyria.com*, 26 September 2015, <http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=24157#more-24157>

⁴⁹ See: <http://nohchicho.com/tribune/abdulhakim-about-23-february/>

⁵⁰ Joanna Paraszczuk, "Interview and Letter from Ajnad al-Kavkas Amir Abdul Hakim Shishani," *ChechensinSyria.com*, 24 February 2017 <http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=25309>

See also: <http://nohchicho.com/interview/abdul-hakim-interview/>

⁵¹ Michael Weiss, "Russia's Double Game with Islamic Terror," *The Daily Beast*, 23 August 2015 <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/08/23/russia-s-playing-a-double-game-with-islamic-terror0.html>

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between Umar Shishani's North Caucasians in IS and those in the CE and its affiliate in Syria," according to Paraszczuk.⁵² As of August 2016, Abu Jihad denied that he ever even pledged allegiance to Imarak Kavkaz.⁵³

Adam Magomadov

Adam Magomadov, a young man of Chechen origin living in Norway, travelled to Syria in August 2014 with an older man, Hasan Ahmed, a Norwegian of Pakistani origin. Both men returned to Norway and were reportedly planning to return to Syria in 2015, when the Norwegian authorities arrested them.⁵⁴ In August 2016 an Oslo court found that the two men while in Syria had pledged allegiance to ISIS and participated in training, though Magomadov stayed in Syria longer and, according to the court's findings, also participated in combat. The court therefore sentenced him to seven and a half years in prison rather than the six years given to Hasan Ahmed.⁵⁵

Russia's Failed Policies and Future Prospects

In the summer of 2015 a story about 19-year-old Moscow State University student Varvara Karaulova made headlines. According to Russian press reports, she had met online with several people, including one man who made her fall in love with him, convinced her to convert to Islam and to leave for Syria to marry him.⁵⁶ Karaulova's father pushed for intensive search efforts soon after her disappearance. Officials found her on the Turkish-Syrian border before she could enter Syria and brought her home. But Russian security services arrested her on charges of communicating with ISIS recruiters, even though by many accounts she appeared to be a victim of ISIS brainwashing rather than a criminal.⁵⁷ Karaulova never harmed or sought to harm anyone, and would no doubt have benefited from psychological counselling, but the Russian court sentenced her to four and a half years in person in December

⁵² Joanna Paraszczuk, "Umar Shishani's Right Hand Man Calls on North Caucasian Jihadis to Join IS in Dagestan and Chechnya," *Jihadology*, 21 April 2015, <http://jihadology.net/2015/04/21/guest-post-umar-shishanis-right-hand-man-calls-on-north-caucasian-jihadis-to-join-is-in-dagestan-chechnya/>

⁵³ Joanna Paraszczuk, "Umar Shishani's Biographer Distances from Imarat Kavkaz Bayah," *ChechensinSyria.com*, 1 August 2016, <http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=25200#more-25200>

⁵⁴ "В Норвегии осуждены двое пособников ИГИЛ," *RIA Novosti*, 3 August 2016 <https://regnum.ru/news/society/2162851.html>

⁵⁵ "Two jailed in Norway for joining ISIS in Syria," *The Local*, 4 August 2016, <https://www.thelocal.no/20160804/two-jailed-in-norway-for-joining-isis-in-syria>

⁵⁶ Vladimir Vashchenko, "Карaulова рассказала о вербовке," *Gazeta.ru*, 27 October 2015 <http://www.gazeta.ru/social/2015/10/27/7848623.shtml>

⁵⁷ "Получила продолжение громкая история вокруг вербовки в ИГИЛ студентки МГУ," *TV Channel 1*, 28 October 2015, https://www.1tv.ru/news/2015/10/28/8474-poluchila_prodolzhenie_gromkaya_istoriya_vokrug_verbovki_v_igil_studentki_mgu.

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2016.⁵⁸ Her case most poignantly highlights the Russian government's failure to craft adequate policies to address radicalization issues.

More broadly, while Russian authorities tend to focus on the mosques in Chechnya and Dagestan, most recruiting takes place outside of them.⁵⁹ In fact, those who receive Islamic education are less likely to succumb to radical ideas. When it comes to charging an individual with the crime of recruitment into ISIS, the charges can be arbitrary. Anyone who simply reposts radical information on social media could face an accusation of recruitment if someone testifies that the individual who posted the information was a recruiter. Russian security services do not shy away from torture, and are eager to demonstrate success. In addition, most recruiters are outside of Russia to begin with.⁶⁰

After Karaulova's story became public Yelena Sutormina, a member of Russia's Civic Chamber, issued brochure advising teachers and parents how to deal with attempted recruitment by ISIS. The Civic Chamber also created the "Resistance to the Islamic State Recruiters" project, which Sutormina heads.⁶¹ No information is available about the success of these efforts.

But Russia's struggle to integrate returnees from ISIS is known. By Russian law, individuals involved in terrorist activities typically face between five and 10 years in prison; in reality it is often solitary confinement. The definition of involvement, moreover, is vague, meaning that Karaulova could face the same sentence as someone involved in actual violence. Anecdotal accounts describe Russia's imprisonment system as more conducive to radicalization rather than reform, particularly among individuals who are put in solitary confinement.⁶²

"The youth have despaired, [and] terrorists use this, lie to them about religious oppression, and lure them into the underground," said one Russian expert. "Let's start with the fact that none of them knows the Sharia at a high level. Even in Dagestan there are no such specialists and Sharia textbooks also does

⁵⁸ "Караулова получила четыре с половиной года общего режима," *Vesti.ru*, 22 December 2016, <http://www.vesti.ru/doc.html?id=2835970>

Vladimir Vashchenko, "Основная идея была — выйти замуж за мусульманина," *Gazeta.ru*, 17 November 2016,

<https://www.gazeta.ru/social/2016/11/17/10341713.shtml>

Daria Litvinova, "IS Fighter or a Girl in Love?" *The Moscow Times*, 20 October 2016,

<https://themoscowtimes.com/articles/daddy-i-made-a-mistake-take-me-home-55796>

⁵⁹ "95% of foreign fighters who join ISIS are recruited by friends and family and radicalization 'rarely occurs in mosques', claims an Oxford University terrorism expert," *Daily Mail*, 25 November 2015. See also International Crisis Group, "The North Caucasus Insurgency and Syria: an Exported Jihad?"

<https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/caucasus/north-caucasus/north-caucasus-insurgency-and-syria-exported-jihad>

⁶⁰ "The North Caucasus Insurgency and Syria: an Exported Jihad?" p. 18.

⁶¹ "Russia Publishes Guidelines on Avoiding IS Recruitment," *The Moscow Times*, 7 December 2015,

<http://www.themoscowtimes.com/news/article/russia-publishes-guidelines-on-avoiding-is-recruitment/552135.html>.

⁶² Based on Sufian Zhemukhov's comments during presentation of International Crisis Group report, "The North Caucasus Insurgency and Syria."

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not exist.”⁶³ In addition, Russian officials according to one report are so ignorant of Islam that they inadvertently end up helping radical imams spread their message in Russia.⁶⁴ Eduard Urazayev, a former official in Dagestan who is now a political analyst, says, “If the high level of corruption and unfavorable socio-economic situation remain, it may further fuel protest sentiments and increase sympathy for the IS.”⁶⁵

Russia’s Muslim community and even some people outside it are now a receptive audience for radical Islamic ideas, regardless of source. ISIS may soon fall, but the ideology will remain. The Kremlin says it got involved in Syria in part to kill radicals there so they don’t return to Russia. While some no doubt will be able to return to Russia and participate in terrorist activities, many will likely try to travel elsewhere, such as Europe, because they know they will probably face harsh interrogation in Russia upon entry, and even if released will continue to be watched. “Foreign fighters usually prefer to export their jihadist cause abroad rather than engaging in riskier insurgent and terrorist activities at home,” according to Jean-François Ratelle, assistant professor at Ottawa University and a North Caucasus expert.⁶⁶ Of course, it only takes a few fighters to conduct insurgent or terrorist activities. Some could slip back into Russia through Georgia or Azerbaijan.⁶⁷ Still, the Russian government’s policies tend to exacerbate radicalization and instability primarily within Russia, and it is from within Russia that the effects emanate far and wide. Until the Kremlin changes its approach, the reverberations are likely to be felt.

⁶³ “ИГИЛ угрожает России: чего ждать от террористов, которые вернутся на Кавказ,” *Moskovskiy Komsomolets*, October 2015, <http://www.mk.ru/politics/2015/10/29/igil-ugrozhaet-rossii-chego-zhdad-ot-terroristov-kotorye-vernutsya-na-kavkaz.html>.

⁶⁴ Evgeniy Balabas, “Как госчиновники в РФ фактически потворствуют исламистам,” *Moskovskiy Komsomolets*, 10 November 2015, <http://www.mk.ru/politics/2015/11/10/kak-goschinovniki-vrf-fakticheski-potvorstvuyut-islamistam.html>

⁶⁵ Arsen Mollayev and Vladimir Isachenkov, “Russia is feeding hundreds of fighters to ISIS – and some are starting to return,” *Business Insider*, 28 October 2015, <http://www.businessinsider.com/ap-islamic-state-on-recruitment-spree-in-russia-2015-10>.

⁶⁶ Jean-François Ratelle (2016), “North Caucasian foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq: assessing the threat of returnees to the Russian Federation,” *Caucasus Survey*, 4:3, 218-238, DOI: 10.1080/23761199.2016.1234096

⁶⁷ Author telephone interview with Jean-François Ratelle, 24 April 2017.