Transnational Salafi and Jihadist Networks

From an independent insurgency to a leaderless network

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Introduction

In recent years, over 9,000 citizens of the former Soviet Union (FSU) have left the region to travel to Syria and Iraq and join various jihadist groups. Of that contingent over 3,000 came from the Caucasus, with Dagestan (at least 1,200 individuals) and Chechnya (at least 600 individuals) being the epicentre of recruitment in the FSU. Furthermore, Caucasian jihadist militants have played key roles within the so-called Islamic State (also known by its Arabic-language acronym Daesh) and other Islamist factions shaping the early onset of the conflict in Syria. With those astronomical numbers in mind, analysts often have taken for granted that the North Caucasus insurgency and other jama’ats in Georgia and Azerbaijan have always been fully integrated within the global jihad of Salafi Sunni orientation.¹

Such a claim requires better historical contextualisation, as the involvement of Caucasian jihadists in the global jihad is in fact a fairly new phenomenon. Although Chechnya and the Caucasus in general have been part of jihadist propaganda over the long-term—particularly with regard to the suffering associated with the Chechen wars—the Chechen and North Caucasus jihadist factions have remained quite independent from the global jihad for years. Only since 2015 have Caucasian militants become fully integrated within transnational Salafi jihadist networks. Against the background of the military defeat of ‘Islamic State’ and the end of its territorial control in Syria and Iraq, it becomes paramount to understand better how this recent affiliation developed and what it can lead to in the near future.

In order to investigate the link between Caucasian insurgents and jihadists and the global jihad, this chapter has three main objectives. It first explains the growing entanglement of Caucasian militants with the global jihad from the collapse of the Soviet Union to the civil war in Syria. It investigates how incoming Arab foreign fighters in Chechnya have strengthened the link between the global jihad and Caucasian rebels, while adapting jihadist ideology to the region. Secondly, it investigates how tensions within the global jihad have deeply affected the North Caucasus insurgency leading to its decay and its fragmentation. Finally, the chapter investigates the motivational factors that have attracted Caucasian militants to
join the global jihad in Syria in comparison to previous conflicts like Afghanistan, Pakistan and Kashmir, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Iraq. In addition, the last section of the chapter investigates the logics behind individuals wanting to wage jihad abroad (Syria) rather than fighting at home in the Caucasus. From there, the chapter concludes by looking at the current status of Caucasus transnational jihadist networks and their impacts on the future of security in the region.

The Chechen wars, the North Caucasus insurgency, and the global jihad

The connections between the Chechen wars, the wider North Caucasus insurgency and the founding of the Caucasus Emirate, and the overall global jihadist movement have always remained a complicated intertwined relationship between a local revival of Islamic practices in the Caucasus and the influence of foreign jihadist actors and their ideologies. Reinforced by the harsh realities of the two Chechen wars, the link between the Caucasian militants and the global jihad evolved from an opportunistic foreign influence in a local conflict to a last resort ideological foundation seeking to unite the insurgency against the Russian state and its local forces. In order to explain this evolution, one can look at three main topics that have structured the study of jihadist activities in the Caucasus and their connection with the global jihad: the roles played by Arab foreign missionaries and fighters in the Caucasus, the ‘jihadisation’ of the Chechen insurgency in 2000s, and the fragmentation within the insurgency in connection with the split between ‘Islamic State’ and al-Qaeda.

The role of Arab foreign fighters in the First Chechen War and the interwar period

It is crucial to understand first how Caucasian Islamists became acquainted with jihadist ideology and what role Arab foreign fighters played in the process. With the beginning of the first Chechen war in 1994, the Caucasus witnessed an influx of Arab foreign fighters and financial support coming from Arab countries seeking to help Chechen rebels against the Russian federal troops. Limited in numbers (roughly 150–200 fighters), these fighters had a negligible effect on the dynamics and outcomes of the war, but drastically transformed the post-war situation by spreading the seeds of Salafi jihadism in the region (see Chapters 13 and 15). The most notorious of these fighters is without a doubt Ibn al-Khattab, an Arab fighter who joined the Chechen insurgency around 1995. Al-Khattab travelled to Chechnya with a small group of Arab militants, creating a hub to propagate global jihad ideology and expand jihadist activities in the FSU. Chechnya, especially the Urus-Martan and Serzhen Yurt districts, became a safe haven for young jihadists from across

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the Caucasus. Chechens, and individuals from other republics such as Ingushetia, Dagestan, and Kabardino-Balkaria, enrolled to flee governmental repression or simply because of the absence of socio-economic opportunities. Approximately 1,600–2,500 fighters would have trained in these camps, most likely Chechens, Arabs, and Dagestanis, but also Balkars, Ingush, Azeris, and Central Asians. After the beginning of the Second Chechen War, many of those extremists travelled back to their respective regions organizing jihadist cells to expand the struggle against the Russian state. From Karachaevo-Cherkessia to Azerbaijan (Lonardo 2016), via Caucasian diasporas in Europe (Hahn 2014) and Central Asia, Chechen secessionists, and subsequently the Caucasus Emirate, launched a social movement uniting like-minded individuals in a transnational network. For example in Azerbaijan, Azeri veterans of the North Caucasian jihad became the main driver of the rise of Salafism and jihadist activities in the country. Even in a predominantly Shi’a country, those jihadists were able to target its Sunni minority in the north, creating jihadist cells and a network of underground mosques. This transnational network has rapidly connected a series of hubs across Eurasia and in Europe, creating recruitment and supply routes between Western Europe, Turkey, Georgia, Azerbaijan, the Volga region, Kazakhstan, and the North Caucasus.  

In the context of this spillover of jihadist activities across the Caucasus, the growing influence of Arab fighters in the Caucasus previously connected to the mujahideen (jihad fighters) in Afghanistan led to a growing body of research investigating the link between the Chechen insurgency and the al-Qaeda network. This research sought to understand the rise of jihadist violence and Salafism in the North Caucasus by interrogating its potential link with foreign jihadist ideology and networks. It was paramount to understand if the Chechen separatist movement and the subsequent North Caucasian insurgency were part of a loose transnational terrorist network associated with al-Qaeda, or the result of local dynamics. Unfortunately, the academic field rapidly became saturated with researchers attributing all Islamist insurgencies to al-Qaeda and its global network, rather than seeking to interrogate the complex nature between local insurgent dynamics and transnational movements (see Chapter 17). The international trope of the ‘Global War on Terror’ promoted by think-tanks and pundits often decontextualised local dynamics or events in order to present a dubious link between the transnational jihadists and local insurgencies. In that context, two main angles appeared as plausible evidence linking al-Qaeda to the North Caucasus jihadists: the relationship between al-Khattab and al-Qaeda founder Osama bin Laden and the presence of senior al-Qaeda figure Ayman al-Zawahiri in Dagestan and Chechnya at the end of the 1990s.  

First, al-Khattab and his followers were usually labelled as al-Qaeda operatives due to their participation in the jihad against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, alongside bin Laden. This narrative gained traction among Russian elites and certain American authors (Bodansky 2007). Based on the fact that between 1989 and 1994 al-Khattab spent time in Afghanistan and connected with bin Laden and al-Qaeda, analysts assumed a hierarchical connection between the two, casting al-Khattab in the role of al-Qaeda’s emissary to the Caucasus. However, the link between al-Khattab and bin Laden remains difficult to document beyond an anecdotal encounter (Moore and Tumelty 2008: 420). Contrary to what is often pictured by pundits and researchers in the literature, al-Khattab could be depicted as a challenger to bin Laden’s charismatic monopoly and authority on the global jihad, rather than his regional emissary in the Caucasus. As Brian Glyn Williams (2004) argues, this highly hierarchical view of al-Qaeda and the links between al-Khattab and bin Laden are very debatable and rely on little empirical evidence. In fact, there is no real proof that al-Khattab ever took direct orders from bin Laden. Most of the available evidence is circumstantial, and at best can only substantiate the fact that they met during the Afghan jihad in the 1980s. Schaefer cites a declassified
report from the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), presenting al-Khattab as a friend and a nucleus member of al-Qaeda. However, the American author questions the reliability of this document (2011: 165). The alternative view is that al-Khattab and other foreign fighters established their own organisational structure based on Salafi-jihadist ideology, rather than being a ‘branch’ of al-Qaeda in the Caucasus. Al-Khattab’s views were indeed closely aligned with Abdullah Azzam’s defensive and territorially-bounded jihad rather than a transnational jihadist agenda focusing on the ‘Far Enemy’ (Moore and Tumelty 2008).4 Such conclusions reinforce the claim that the Caucasus jihad remained organic to the region, had indigenous roots, and only depended minimally on foreign support and ideology.

A second link made between al-Qaeda and the Chechen secessionist movement has focused on the presence of Ayman al-Zawahiri, bin Laden’s top lieutenant at the time and al-Qaeda’s actual leader, in Dagestan and in neighbouring Chechnya in the late 1990s. Al-Zawahiri was arrested in Dagestan and spent five months in prison in Makhachkala. His travel to the Caucasus region was often portrayed as part of a larger strategy to include the North Caucasus into al-Qaeda’s larger strategic objectives following the end of the Afghan jihad. However, such a potential alliance between al-Qaeda and North Caucasus jihadists never really materialised even if al-Zawahiri openly advocates for it in his discourses.

Both narratives nevertheless underline that the leaders of the global jihad perceived Chechnya and the Caucasus as a vital space for engagement following the end of the Soviet Union and the First Chechen War. At the same time, local Caucasus jihadists remained rather disconnected from the main decision-making circles associated with the expansion of the jihad in the Middle East, particularly after September 2001 and the subsequent invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq.

The Second Chechen War: the ‘jihadisation’ of the Chechen movement

The interwar period (1996–99) between the First and the Second Chechen Wars saw a growing confrontation in Chechen domestic politics between the early secular government of Aslan Maskhadov, the third President of the ChRI, and a heterogeneous amalgamation of Islamised warlords, comprised of ethnic Chechens like Shamil Basayev, Salman Raduyev or Arbi Barayev, and foreign fighters, such as al-Khattab. Many local warlords adopted the Salafi jihadist ideology proselytised by Arab foreign fighters as well as their tactics and overall objectives and adapted them to the Caucasian context. Emboldened by the inability of the Chechen government to challenge or control them, Basayev, al-Khattab and their jihadist fighters launched an invasion of Dagestan seeking to support local Salafists and expanding their jihadist activities toward the Caspian Sea. The Dagestan invasion significantly contributed to the beginning of the Second Chechen War and by the same token the growing influence of Salafi-jihadists inside the Chechen insurgency.

In the context of the beginning of the ‘War on Terror’, the Second Chechen War marked the slow and incremental transition of leadership and the ideology of the North Caucasus (Chechen) insurgency from a nationalist-separatist agenda to a jihadist one. This transformation took years to be completed as power incrementally slipped away from the nationalist wing of the insurgency. All authors agree on the process itself, but disagree on the main causes of this transition. Gordon Hahn talks about ‘Chechens’ radicalisation under the influence of foreign, jihadist terrorist ideologies and movement funded, inspired, and perhaps […] coordinated by al Qaeda’ (2007: 14). Other authors such Hughes and Sagramoso suggest that the Chechen nationalist resistance evolved toward a growing Salafi-jihadist rhetoric because of a multitude of factors such as the presence of foreign fighters in southern Chechnya, the generational
change in the region, the political situation during the interwar period, and the difficulties encountered in the Second Chechen War (Hughes 2007; Sagramoso 2007, 2012).

The Russian military success in the Second Chechen War achieved through the Chechenisation of the conflict led to the growing empowerment of extremist factions inside the Chechen insurgency. Although still not directly connected to the global jihadist movement, the insurgency incrementally became controlled by Salafi-jihadist leaders including Arab fighters adopting tactics and strategies inspired by international jihadist groups like al-Qaeda. As early as the 2000s, one can observe a growing ‘jihadisation’ and ‘Salafisation’ of the discourse of various insurgent groups in the Caucasus. By the mid-2000s, the vast majority of the first Arab foreign fighters had been killed as well as their early Caucasian partners, but a new generation of young jihadists was joining the movement. The link with the global jihad that existed through the Arab contingent slowly disappeared, leaving a vacuum to be filled by local jihadists. From that point on, one could notice a slow, but incremental generational change within the insurgency. This was particularly obvious in Chechnya, but also in Dagestan and Ingushetia (Hahn 2007; Campana and Ratelle 2014). Instead of being driven by the global jihad, foreign emissaries and/or al-Qaeda itself, this radical ‘Salafisation’ of the ideology was organic to the North Caucasus with ideologues such as Anzor Astemirov, Abdul-Khalim Sadulaev, Yasin Rasulov, Musa Mukozhev, Magomedali Vagabov, and sheikh Ali Abu Muhammad al-Dagestani (Aliaskhab Kebekov).

The death of Aslan Maskhadov in 2005 finalised the Islamisation of the insurgency paving the way for its subsequent ‘jihadisation’ under the leadership of Abdul-Khalim Sadulaev and later Dokka Umarov (Hughes 2007: 105). Domitilla Sagramoso describes it as ‘the culmination of a process of Islamisation of the entire North Caucasian rebel movement, which began in the late 1990s’ (2012: 590–91). The ideological foundation of the insurgency rapidly changed toward a Salafi-jihadist model. Youngman (2019) explains how the insurgency turned toward a nationalist-jihadist ideology focusing on the liberation of the Caucasus from colonial powers (e.g. Russia), but organised around the concept of jihad uniting all Muslims in the region.

Such drastic changes were described by certain authors as a move toward ‘global jihadist movement’, underlining the organic link with al-Qaeda and its affiliates (Hahn 2014). For Hahn, the ‘jihadisation’ of the ChRI and the subsequent establishment of the Caucasus Emirate (see below) underline how the insurgency became ideologically aligned with the al-Qaeda transnational network. This view was challenged by researchers focusing on local drivers and dynamics explaining the rise of jihadist activities (Sagramoso 2012; Campana and Ratelle 2014; Ratelle and Souleimanov 2017). As Sagramoso argues, the role played by al-Qaeda should not be exaggerated and can rather be seen as mainly inspirational, based on shared strategic objectives (Sagramoso 2012: 564). Only several years later would the North Caucasus insurgency officially join al-Qaeda’s transnational network, when Aliaskhab Kebekov pledged allegiance to Ayman al-Zawahiri in 2014. This was an incremental process, whereby parochial jihadist-based organisations established by Chechen leaders graduated to a formal affiliation with al-Qaeda and subsequently to declarations of allegiance with the ‘Islamic State’ by rogue field commanders.

**The Caucasus Emirate: the unification of the North Caucasus jihadist groups**

In October 2007, Dokka Umarov announced the creation of the Caucasus Emirate, a Salafi-jihadist group aiming to unite all Muslims in the Caucasus. By creating the Caucasus
Emirate, Umarov abolished the ChRI, its Islamo-nationalist agenda, and the quest for Chechen independence. The creation of the Caucasus Emirate marked an important change with regard to the relationship between the North Caucasus insurgency and the global jihad. Although the local jihadist movement remained independent from existing transnational jihadist networks and centred on the Caucasus, its ideology and its objectives became incrementally aligned with them. Youngman (2016) explains that the Caucasus Emirate’s ideology adopted a new definition of its main enemy marking a change in its ideological component. Umarov, in his speeches, started to label Russian forces as unbelievers rather than occupiers framing its action in the name of Muslims in the Caucasus and more generally along a transnational jihadist agenda.

This renewed jihadist agenda put forward by Umarov also coincided with the return of suicide bombings to the Caucasus. Terrorist attacks had drastically declined after the infamous Beslan attacks and the subsequent backlash across the region and the Muslim world in general. In April 2009, the infamous Riyad al-Saliheen (‘Gardens of the Righteous’) martyr brigade created by Shamil Basayev was reactivated by Dokka Umarov. Umarov and his inner circle launched a series of terrorist attacks on Russian soil seeking to bring the war in Russian cities leading to the Moscow Metro and Domodedovo International Airport suicide attacks in March 2010 and January 2011 respectively.6 Following this terror campaign, Umarov became officially linked to the global jihadist movement on the U.S. Department of State’s list of designated international terrorists with a $5 million reward for his capture or information on his whereabouts.

This renewed campaign based on a Salafi-jihadist doctrine also marked a change in the Caucasus Emirate’s openness to international issues connected to the ummah (the global community of Muslim believers). Umarov became increasingly involved in international affairs connected to the Muslim world rather than focusing strictly on the Caucasus itself. By declaring that the North Caucasus is an ‘integral part of the Muslim ummah’, Umarov openly engaged in a programme focusing on reconquering ‘all the historic lands of Muslims’, broadening his struggle to the Muslim population in Russia and in the Caucasus (see Youngman 2016), as well as building on a sense of common grievances at wrongs enacted against Islam and its followers. At the same time, Umarov ‘rhetorically aligned the movement with jihadists elsewhere and displayed greater hostility towards the West, but without altering the overall hierarchy of enemies or undermining the focus on domestic affairs’ (Youngman 2019: 377). In other words, although adopting a jihad-based ideology, the Caucasus Emirate remained focussed on its immediate goals (that is, the struggle against the Russian state) and local objectives. Umarov avoided openly challenging or threatening the West or bandwagoning on its status of the ‘Far Enemy’ in jihadist propaganda.

This limitation of Salafi-jihadist ideology created internal tensions inside the North Caucasus insurgency. For example, Youngman underlines that tensions arose with regard to the definition of who could be considered enemies of Islam, particularly with reference to the United States, Israel and Britain. Youngman argues that two versions of the proclamation of the Emirate existed with one of them omitting the sentence ‘Our enemy is not only Rusiya [Russia], but also America, England, Israel, all who wage war against Islam and Muslims’ (Youngman 2019: 376). He demonstrates that the transformation and integration into the global jihadist movement remained limited by the internal tensions inside the insurgency, and underlines the existence of a more moderate wing inside the movement. The final turn towards an explicitly global jihadist approach would only happen later in the history of the Caucasus Emirate, culminating after Umarov’s death.
Before his death and in connection with the beginning of the Syrian civil war, Umarov started advertising the link between international jihadist fronts and the Caucasus Emirate, even if his speeches and strategies remained dedicated to the Caucasus and the fight against Russian forces. This new, but limited engagement with international affairs was the result of growing concern that Syria would become the new hub for international jihadists attracting even young Caucasians, and also that the Arab Spring was offering a different approach to political change in the Middle East that challenged the traditional jihadist approach. As Youngman underlines, Umarov has ‘portrayed North Caucasians fighting in Syria as people unable to (re)join the insurgency at home’ (Youngman 2019: 376), rather than openly choosing another front of jihad. Although supporting the jihad in Syria, Umarov and later Aliaskhab Kebekov – Umarov’s successor – sought to mitigate its negative effect on the North Caucasus insurgency.

After Umarov’s death, the Caucasus Emirate became crippled with internal tensions between internationalists supporting the Syrian jihad and supporters of a predominantly local jihad. At the same time, the Syrian civil war was having a catalytic effect on Caucasian militants’ mobility within the jihadist world, but it also created a ripple effect towards the Caucasus and its relative autonomy within the global jihad. Kebekov inherited an insurgency in turmoil, openly challenged by Caucasian insurgents in Syria and Iraq as well as local insurgents in the Caucasus. The Caucasus Emirate was losing its influential monopoly on Caucasian militants as well as other Russian-speaking jihadists in Central Asia and in Europe. Growing numbers of young Caucasians were leaving the region to join a foreign jihad rather than fighting at home, accelerating the decay of the insurgency and leading to the end of its relative independence from the global jihad.

Starting in 2012, small groups of Caucasian jihadists joined al-Qaeda’s affiliate in Syria – Jabhat al-Nusra (‘The Front of the Supporters’, JaN) – and later the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). Rather than having the Caucasus Emirate integrated within the global jihad and sending their own fighters to join the Syrian jihad, new recruits simply bypassed the organisation, diminishing its importance and relevance in relation to other jihadist groups in the world. This moment marks a profound change in the jihad in the Caucasus.

For the first time, local leaders focusing on their jihad against Russia were outbid by jihadists outside of the Caucasus. Furthermore, prior to the Syrian civil war, the majority of the jihadist groups in Azerbaijan and Georgia were connected to the Caucasus Emirate. In the context of the growing success of Caucasian jihadists in Syria and later in Iraq, combined with the relative inactivity of the North Caucasus insurgency following Umarov’s death, Kebekov was unable to maintain his symbolic leadership inside Caucasian jihadist circles. In a way, the global jihad, the Syrian jihad, and Caucasian factions had hijacked the North Caucasus leadership from Kebekov.

The final blow came in relation to the tensions between ISIS and JaN regarding the jihad in Syria and the affiliation with al-Qaeda central command. As ISIS and JaN entered into a theological and ideological battle leading to what became known as the fitnah (‘discord’), the Caucasus insurgency had for the first time in its history to position itself within the global jihad and its internal clashes. As Kebekov supported al-Qaeda in one of his speeches in June 2014, other militants in Syria and Iraq, including influential Caucasian field commanders such as Tarkhan Batirashvili (Umar al-Shishani) and ideologues such as Islam Seit-Umarovich Atabiyev (Abu Jihad), supported ISIS. Even the Caucasus Emirate’s leader engaged in online theological debates with his opponents citing hadith and the Qur’an to support the Emirate’s own positions regarding religious duties linked with jihad at home and abroad. The Caucasus Emirate was losing the popular support battle in the Caucasus as
well as in the Middle East. Such public (online) ideological clashes underlined the tensions within the Caucasian and Russian-speaking jihadist circles, challenged the North Caucasus insurgency’s independence inside the global jihad, led to the decay of Kebekov’s leadership, and marked the shrinking influence of Kebekov and the Caucasus Emirate among Russian-speaking jihadists.

Even if Kebekov finally pledged allegiance to Ayman al-Zawahiri and al-Qaeda, Caucasian jihadists at home and abroad had already defected towards ‘Islamic State’. The youth and potential recruits in the Caucasus, as well as established jihadist factions, were incrementally turning toward ‘Islamic State’ inspired by their military victories and their new ideology. In December 2014, Rustam Asilderov and other insurgents such as Aslan Byutukayev pledged allegiance to ‘Islamic State’, leading to the creation of ‘Islamic State’s Wilayah al-Qawqa (‘Caucasus Province’, CW) announced by Muhammad al-Adnani in June 2015 (Joscelyn 2015). Although mainly symbolic, this announcement marked the beginning of the end for the Caucasus Emirate and more generally for the North Caucasus insurgency. The jihadist commanders used the trending brand of the ‘Islamic State’ and its religious relevance for youth in particular in order to splinter the insurgency in the North Caucasus and hijack its leadership to the Caucasus Emirate.

As the North Caucasus insurgency completed its integration within the global jihadist movement, what remained was mainly an empty shell while the vast majority of its fighters and supporters are now dispersed in the Middle East, mainly Syria, Iraq and Turkey, as well as in Europe and Ukraine. The ideological tensions within the insurgency, the emigration of its main supporters and recruitment pool, and the elimination of its main leaders left CW and the Caucasus Emirate as a depleted and fragmented insurgency unable to face Russian security forces in the North Caucasus.

Caucasians in foreign jihadist fronts: from non-engagement to the largest contingent in Europe

The involvement of Caucasians in the global jihad has progressed slowly following the collapse of the Soviet Union and culminated with the Syrian civil war. Anchored in the Islamic revival in the region, Caucasian jihadist militants have first turned their attention to allegedly non-Islamic regimes at home before incrementally engaging in jihadist networks outside of the former Soviet Union. With the turmoil of Chechen independence in the early 1990s, small contingents of militants started to travel to Afghanistan in order to connect with the Taliban and join al-Qaeda training camps. For example, the 9/11 Commission Report shows tangible links between al-Qaeda and certain members of the Chechen insurgency including Shamil Basayev (2004). Basayev, in an interview, confirmed that Chechen fighters, including himself, spent time in Afghanistan for military training in 1994. Hahn argues that many Chechens and Dagestanis visited Afghanistan during the interwar period (1996–99), including Movladi Udugov (2011: 3). As the Second Chechen War started and the War on Terror began in the Middle East, a minority of militants from the Caucasus started turning to Afghanistan, Iraq and other Muslim countries to wage jihad abroad. In comparison to the Syrian civil war and its contingent, this phenomenon remained relatively marginal and can be explained by the priority given to the struggle against Russian forces. The vast majority of people fought in the Caucasus mainly in Chechnya, Dagestan, and Ingushetia.

Even with the growing influence of Salafi jihadists in the North Caucasus and the development of an extended network of training camps, the involvement of Caucasian fighters in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq remained mostly marginal during the 2000s. For several years, residents of the North Caucasus avoided foreign jihadist conflicts. The level of cultural
foreignness and the language barrier greatly limited the involvement of North Caucasian fighters in popular jihadist fronts in the world, such as Afghanistan and Iraq in the 2000s. Although some authors have speculated about the relative abundance of Caucasian fighters in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq (Bodansky 2007) building on the hype of the ‘Global War on Terror’, very few cases were documented by researchers. As expressed by Williams (2015: 216), ‘No Chechens were among the over 774 Al Qaeda/Taliban members ultimately detained by Central Command in the US overthrow of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in the fall of 2001 and sent to the US prison at Guantanamo Bay’. The most documented Russian cases involve two militants from Kabardino-Balkaria (Ruslan Kaduyev and Ruslan Odizhev) and one from Tatarstan captured in Afghanistan in 2001, held at Guantanamo Bay, and finally deported to Russia.

At the same time, based on extensive fieldwork and investigative research in Afghanistan, Brian Glyn Williams and Carlotta Gall conclude that probably no Chechen militants or very few were captured or killed in Afghanistan in the 2000s (Williams 2004; Gall 2002, cited in Williams 2015: 217–218). In his most recent book, Gordon Hahn discusses various reports underlining evidence of a limited number of North Caucasians joining jihadist fronts abroad including Chechen fighters killed in Iraq following the American invasion, North Caucasians arrested in Lebanon in 2007, as well as members of the Gubden jama’at travelling to Afghanistan in the early 2000s (Hahn 2014: 223). Those reports remain anecdotal, underlining the very limited number of Caucasians fighting jihad abroad. It also denotes a dominant trend amongst Caucasian militants focusing on the North Caucasus jihad and other subversive activities in Georgia and Azerbaijan.

By the end of 2010, however, cases of potential terrorist activities inside the Caucasian diaspora in the West start emerging. Those cases showed cross-fertilisation between jihadists in Europe and the USA including Caucasians as well as covert links with the Caucasus Emirate. For example, Hahn stresses the role played by the North Caucasian diaspora in recent terrorist plots in Belgium and the Czech Republic (2011: 9–12). One can also add the Boston Marathon bombing to this list as Tamerlan Tsarnaev, an ethnic Chechen, travelled to Dagestan to connect with the Caucasus Emirate. After his unsuccessful attempt to reach the Caucasus Emirate, Tsarnaev returned to the United States of America in order to organise an attack against the Boston Marathon, killing three and injuring 264 individuals. Those terrorist plots were inspired by al-Qaeda’s ideology and often indirectly connected to the Caucasus Emirate, but they were not directed by those organisations. The major shift regarding Caucasians’ participation in foreign jihadist fronts happened with the beginning of the Syrian civil war in 2011. For the first time in post-Soviet history, another front of jihad was perceived by Caucasian Muslims as a viable alternative to the North Caucasus insurgency. Over 1,500 militants left the Caucasus to join jihadist and insurgent groups in Syria and Iraq.

In order to explain this transformative attitudinal change amongst militants, it is important to understand the variation in motivations between the different contingents of fighters. In my previous work, I have argued that one can identify two distinct waves of mobilisation (Ratelle 2016). The first wave was composed of Caucasian people living in exile in Europe and in Georgia (mainly Chechens), as well as veterans of the Second Chechen War hiding in Turkey and Georgia. For the younger generation of exiled Chechens, the Chechen wars were perceived through a vicarious traumatic experience that facilitated their mobilisation as well as an opportunity to connect with their own culture. Many of those youth have known the Chechen conflicts online and through their parents’ experience, but never had the opportunity to mobilise to support the cause. Their inability to travel to the Caucasus and join the North Caucasus insurgency led them to look for a valid alternative. In that
mindset, Syria was seen as a temporary jihad experience until the moment they could return to the North Caucasus and fight Russian and pro-Russian forces as well as the Muslim clergy. For veterans of the Chechen wars, Syria represented an opportunity to connect with jihadist groups, find a safe haven for their activities, and protect fellow Sunni Muslims against a repressive regime. The latter factor is particularly important as it connects with their own experience in Chechnya and the lack of international support they received during the Second Chechen War. In Syria, the long-lasting experience earned by Caucasian jihadists in the two Chechen wars has positioned them to become the leading figures within the Russian-speaking contingent of foreign fighters. Even amongst Arabic fighters, the Caucasian jihadists, based on the Chechen stereotype propagated by international media, were perceived as courageous and skilful fighters as well as accomplished military commanders.

It is also important to add that the logistics of the mobilisation were greatly facilitated by existing Caucasian networks and communities in Turkey helping to arrange accommodation, transport and resources to reach the Syrian border. Those networks greatly reduced the logistical challenges to travel and adapt to a foreign jihad. In Syria, new recruits had the opportunity to fight a foreign jihad in Russian or their own vernaculars as well as living in their own subculture facilitating their adaptation, something that would have been impossible in Afghanistan or Pakistan in the early 2000s.

The second wave of foreign fighters coincided with the rise and establishment of the so-called ‘Islamic State’ in 2014. The series of military victories in 2013 and 2014 and the proclamation of an Islamic state ruled under shari’ah law inside the Middle East played on the religious imagination of Salafists in the Caucasus. Syria was now perceived as a valid alternative to the jihad in the North Caucasus because of its religious significance, the opportunity to receive military training and connect with international jihadist actors. Several thousand individuals answered ‘Islamic State’s call for hijrah (‘emigration’) to the ‘caliphate’ and openly chose to join a foreign jihad rather than fighting at home. Many factors can explain this sudden outflow of fighters outside of the Russian Federation, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. Online propaganda, religious repression, and religious duty are among the most often cited factors within the literature (ICG 2016; Lonardo 2016; Ratelle 2016; Ratelle and Broers 2017). It is often a combination of those factors in conjunction with the facilitating networks described earlier and the decay of the North Caucasus insurgency that created perfect conditions for the outflow of jihadists, as well as ordinary Salafists, to Syria and Iraq.

Many of the new recruits shared similar views with regard to their religious stigmatisation in their own country. Policies of national security governance seeking to securitise Salafism played an important role in motivating Muslims to leave for Syria. Crackdowns on non-official mosques, discrimination, public humiliation based on religious profiling, and prophylactic registers limiting basic human rights of Salafists in the Caucasus fostered a will to leave the region. Young Caucasian Salafists in Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Russia shared a common sense of grievance against their own governments and their repressive policies against non-traditional forms of Islam. Repressive and prophylactic operations against Salafism in the North Caucasus, particularly in Dagestan as well as in Azerbaijan, resonated with ‘Islamic State’ propaganda and their narrative focusing on a sense of belonging for all Sunni Muslims (Ratelle and Broers 2017). Mainstream and apolitical Salafists often not interested by the anti-Russian jihadist ideology put forward by the Caucasus Emirate became increasingly attracted to the social and utopian approach of the ‘Islamic State’.

The ‘Islamic State’ narrative was also built upon a social utopia about life in the Caliphate as unique, based on an orthodox understanding of Islam, welcoming families including women and children. Recruiters insisted on the religious repression and stigmatisation in
Russia and in the South Caucasus in general, as well as a growing resentment against marginalisation in the Caucasus. It was less about the jihad itself, but rather about choosing a new life that attracted so many religious individuals to Syria. ‘Islamic State’ was able to connect with people from different socioeconomic backgrounds, ethnic groups, and genders. Such a conclusion is not limited to Caucasian extremist travellers, but applies also to many Western countries including France, the United Kingdom, and Canada.

For many Caucasians in Dagestan, Chechnya, Azerbaijan and Georgia, ‘Islamic State’ provided the opportunity to live under shari‘ah law without interference from local secular governments. After living through years of religious humiliation composed of religious profiling, crackdowns on moderate Salafi mosques, corruption and arbitrary arrests, Salafists in the Caucasus had the opportunity to travel to what they perceived as a shari‘ah-based state that did not require travel documents except for a passport and for which the journey was much easier than for Afghanistan or Pakistan. Furthermore, Russian-speaking communities were also being created in Raqqa and other cities in Syria, facilitating adaptation for Caucasian jihadists. This approach marks an important difference between Syria and previous international jihadist fronts such as Afghanistan and Iraq. Although mainly centred on a religious narrative connected to a sense of historic nostalgia geared toward the creation of a utopian society in the Levant, ‘Islamic State’ also built its recruitment on the emotional need to belong, felt by many young Muslims.

The ‘Islamic State’ propaganda played also on the religious duty of fighting jihad in Syria and joining the Caliphate, as well as the daily routines of a good Muslim inside this newly established state structure. Many young people including women perceived it as an opportunity for salvation for themselves and their relatives. The ‘Islamic State’ propaganda was structured along a binary understanding of the world, labelling all Muslims as being with, or against the Caliphate. The prophetic methodology and the hadith associated with the Levant were used to reinforce this sense of urgency among young Caucasians and the importance to travel immediately to the Caliphate.

The ‘Islamic State’ managed to attract more people to the battlefield than any other jihadist groups, but they also reached a whole new generation of sympathisers in the Caucasus. Because of their military successes in Syria, Russian-speaking jihadist groups in Syria, including those within the ‘Islamic State’, gained instant notoriety and prestige among youth in the Caucasus. Violent videos and slick propaganda gained traction as recruitment tools with this particular constituency. Even people that did not make the hijrah and stayed in the region became deeply engaged with ‘Islamic State’ ideology and sought to propagate it in the region. For that purpose, jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq adapted their propaganda targeting Caucasian people and developed recruitment campaigns in local vernaculars (Chechen, Avar, Azeri and Karachai), challenging the Caucasian Emirate on its own turf and seeking to outscore and outbid the North Caucasus insurgency. This process was never completed because of the recent military defeat of the ‘Islamic State’ in Syria and Iraq and the weakness of its organizational insurgent structure in the Caucasus. At the same time, the North Caucasus insurgency and the Caucasus Emirate – crushed by the effective Russian counterinsurgency – were never able to recover their influence among Caucasian militants.

**Conclusion**

This chapter provided an overview of the links between the global jihad and Caucasian jihadists since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. It underlined the role played by Arab foreign fighters and al-Qaeda operatives in Chechnya and in the Caucasus in general, but also argued
for the organic and local nature of the Islamisation and the ‘jihadisation’ of an indigenous campaign of resistance. The Chechen insurgency evolved from a nationalist ideology to a pan-Islamic and pan-Caucasian one under the influence of this plethora of actors. This process led to the creation of the Caucasus Emirate and its objective to unite all Muslims in the Caucasus against a common enemy — the Russian state and its proxies in the region.

As underlined in this chapter, the Chechen insurgency and the Caucasus Emirate took years to become fully integrated into the global jihad. During that period, the North Caucasus insurgency followed its own trajectory focusing on local objectives often expressed through a jihadist agenda. At the same time, the Caucasus Emirate remained relatively independent from the global jihad until its collapse provoked by the rise of the so-called Islamic State in Syria and Iraq and the ideological tensions between al-Qaeda and ‘Islamic State’. For example, until the civil war in Syria, very few Caucasus militants fought in foreign jihadist fronts; the vast majority of the Caucasian jihadists focused instead on the struggle against local regimes and their anti-Islamic policies. To understand this change in attitude, the chapter analysed how young militants from the Caucasus became attracted by ‘Islamic State’ propaganda and joined the organisation en masse to flee from religious repression at home and fulfil a sense of religious duty. The religious and moral significance of the Syrian civil war, the declaration of the Caliphate in 2014, and its military successes in Syria and Iraq created the conditions for Caucasian jihadists to leave their home jihad to fight for the ‘Islamic State’.

Because of the Syrian civil war, its attractiveness among Sunni Muslims, the ripple effect of the establishment of the ‘Islamic State’ and the fitnah with al-Qaeda, the Caucasus Emirate was unable to remain secluded from the global jihad. Those external influences reinforced existing cleavages within the North Caucasus insurgency and a profound vacuum of leadership within jihadist circles in the Russian-speaking Muslim world that remains to be filled. After the fall of ‘Islamic State’, Russian-speaking militants including Central Asians and Caucasians left Syria and Iraq in large numbers to return to post-Soviet Eurasia, Europe and Turkey in hiding or chose to continue the fight on other fronts of jihad such as Egypt. The vacuum within extremist activities was filled by leaderless networks of small jihadist cells composed of Caucasian and Central Asian militants across Russia, Ukraine, Georgia, and the Middle East, but without an integrated structure unifying all of those units. As the threat associated with Russian-speaking jihadists connected to the global jihad has diffused more broadly in the Middle East and in the FSU, Caucasian militants have been increasingly involved in terrorist attacks outside of Syria, including an attack on Istanbul airport in 2016, foiled attacks in Georgia and Turkey, and a series of small terrorist attacks inside the Russian Federation. With the defeat of the ‘Islamic State’ in Syria and Iraq and the crippled North Caucasus insurgency in the Caucasus, one can only speculate about what will be the next step with regard to the global jihad in the region. It remains to be seen if the ‘Islamic State’ or the North Caucasus insurgency will be able to recover from their losses in the region and rebuild the backbone of a jihadist insurgency in the Caucasus.

Notes

1 In this chapter, I am using the concept of ‘global jihad’ when dealing with transnational violent jihad established within the Salafi Sunni tradition.
2 For additional information on the development of those networks, see the literature of the spillover of Chechen insurgent activities Hahn (2007, 2014); Schaefer (2011); Campana and Ratelle (2014).
3 The Russian government certainly contributed to feeding that dubious claim, seeking to link its counter-insurgency in Chechnya to the ‘Global War on Terror’ waged by the United States against al-Qaeda.
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4 Abdullah Azzam was a Sunni Islam scholar known for organising financial and military support for the Afghan jihad in the 1980s. He was also the co-founder of al-Qaeda along with Osama bin Laden. Azzam’s ideological views focused on the concept of a defensive and territorially bounded jihad aimed at protecting local Muslims against repressive secular regimes (the ‘Near Enemy’). Starting in the 1990s, bin Laden would later support a globalist strategy seeking to expand jihadist activities outside of Muslim lands by targeting the United States and its allies, the ‘Far Enemy’.

5 The Chechenisation of the Second Chechen War was a policy launched in the early 2000s by Moscow to split the Chechen secessionist movement by co-opting Chechen warlords to fight against other Chechens. By capitalising on the religious and social tensions between jihadists and Sufi leaders, Moscow recruited Akhmad Kadyrov and his followers to conduct the majority of the military operations against other separatist and jihadist forces in Chechnya. Building on those military successes, Kadyrov established a de facto administration in Chechnya loyal to Moscow and responsible for ending the military conflict in the republic.

6 Umarov would later change his approach and ceased terrorist attacks against civilian targets.

7 In this chapter, I differentiate between the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) and the Islamic State. The former term applies to the entity created in April 2013 when Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced the merger of the Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State in Iraq. The latter refers to the creation of a caliphate (‘Islamic State’) announced in June 2014 by al-Baghdadi. Although being the same organisation with the same leadership, I have used the different names for greater clarification.

8 It is important to underline that in 1994, al-Qaeda’s command centre was located in Sudan. Basayev and his inner circle most likely met with Central Asian militants rather than with Osama bin Laden (Williams 2015).

9 The number of extremist travellers per capita of Muslim population is lower in the Caucasus and the former Soviet Union republics compared to some European countries like Belgium or Sweden.

References


