

### Trends in foreign fighter recruitment and Islamist extremism in Adjara, Georgia

Hikari Cecire, Michael

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

#### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Hikari Cecire, M. (2017). Trends in foreign fighter recruitment and Islamist extremism in Adjara, Georgia. *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, 93, 5-8. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-88299-4>

#### Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY-NC-ND Lizenz (Namensnennung-Nicht-kommerziell-Keine Bearbeitung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/deed.de>

#### Terms of use:

This document is made available under a CC BY-NC-ND Licence (Attribution-Non Commercial-NoDerivatives). For more information see:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>

### References

- Byman, Daniel. 2015 “The Homecomings: What Happens When Arab Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria Returns?” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*. 38(8): 581–602.
- Campana, Aurélie and Jean-François Ratelle. 2014. “A Political Sociology Approach to the Diffusion of Conflict from Chechnya to Dagestan and Ingushetia.” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 37 (2): 115–134.
- Hahn, Gordon. 2014. *The Caucasus Emirate Mujahedin: Global Jihadism in Russia's North Caucasus and Beyond*, Jefferson: McFarland.
- Hegghammer, Thomas. 2013. “Should I Stay or Should I Go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadist’s Choice between Domestic and Foreign Fighting”, *American Political Science Review* 107(1): 1–15.
- International Crisis Group (ICG) 2016. *The North Caucasus Insurgency and Syria: An Exported Jihad?* Europe Report N°238, 16 March. Brussels: International Crisis Group.
- Ratelle, Jean-François. 2016. “North Caucasian foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq: Assessing the threat of returnees to the Russian Federation,” *Caucasus Survey*, 4(3): 218–238.
- Ratelle, Jean-François, and Emil A. Souleimanov. 2015. “Retaliation in Rebellion: The Missing Link to Explaining Insurgent Violence in Dagestan.” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, published online: 17 March 2015. <DOI:10.1080/09546553.2015.1005076>
- Souleimanov, Emil. Forthcoming. “A Failed Revolt? Assessing the Viability of the North Caucasus Insurgency,” *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*.
- Youngman, Mark. 2016. “Between Caucasus and caliphate: the splintering of the North Caucasus insurgency,” *Caucasus Survey*, 4(3): 194–217.

## Trends in foreign fighter recruitment and Islamist extremism in Adjara, Georgia

By Michael Hikari Cecire (New America, Washington, D.C.)

### Abstract

This article provides an empirical account of the growth of non-“Chechen” Islamist extremism in Georgia, focusing primarily on ethnic Georgian Muslim populations in southwestern Georgia. While ethnic “Chechen” (Kist) foreign fighters from Georgia appear to comprise the majority of Georgian militant exports to the wars in Syria and Iraq—and certainly have gained the most international media attention—there is evidence of increased numbers of Muslim Georgian Islamist militant recruitment and outflow. This article examines potential causes for Adjara radicalization as well as its potential growth trajectory, and analyzes possible impacts on domestic and regional affairs.

### Introduction

Georgia-born foreign fighter participation in the conflicts in Syria and Iraq has attracted outsized attention in the international media, largely due to the exploits of the famed Omar al Shishani (Tarkhan Batirashvili), who won international notoriety for propelling the so-called Islamic State (IS) to a string of victories in 2014 and 2015 as the group’s top military commander. Aside from Batirashvili, at least four other Syrian Islamist rebel commanders (and possibly five) hailed from Georgia. While Georgians likely have made up no more than 100–200 foreign fighters over the course of the Syria

conflict—making it a much smaller contributor than its neighbors Turkey, Russia, and even Azerbaijan—Georgian *emirs* were certainly overrepresented in positions of rebel command.

The prominence of Georgian *emirs* in Syria was largely a function of two interrelated factors. First, initial foreign fighter outflows to the Syria theatre from Georgia were primarily comprised of preexisting Islamist insurgent networks. In Georgia, “first wave” Syria-bound militant Islamist insurgents were culled almost entirely at first from groups that had supported or participated in the North Caucasus insurgencies in Russia.

By dint of its proximity and rugged geography, some former fighters and their sympathizers had decamped to Georgia. Second, and relatedly, these insurgent networks were facilitated by the existence of Georgian ethnic Vainakh (Kists) communities native to Georgia, specifically in the Pankisi Gorge. Culturally close to the Chechens and Ingush, and arguably integrated into the broader Chechen cultural space, Kist communities in Pankisi hosted Chechen refugees in the 1990s, including some fleeing fighters, and variously provided men, materiel, and support for North Caucasus insurgencies into the 2000s.

Kist participation in Syria was thus a natural outgrowth of escalating North Caucasian involvement in that conflict, as Georgian fighters joined Caucasus Emirate (IK) compatriots from the North Caucasus in the first wave, and the transnational IS project—buoyed in no small part by the exploits of the half-Kist Batirashvili—in the latter years.

However, while Kists have formed the bulk of Georgian foreign fighter cadres, non-Kist ethnic Georgian Muslims (largely from the western autonomous republic of Adjara) and ethnic Azerbaijanis from eastern Georgia have also been confirmed to be fighting in Syria. Because they appeared in notably fewer numbers than Georgian Kists, and certainly occupied lower profile compared to “Chechen” fighters, substantial evidence of their participation only appeared in the post-2014 “second wave” period, by which point IS had well overtaken IK as the predominant militant Islamist force in Syria. The appearance of non-Kist Georgian fighters in Syria is notable not necessarily for their numbers—even as a proportion of Georgian foreign fighter totals, they likely make up well less than half—but because of their extraction from larger communities with little reputation for radicalization. According to the 2014 Georgian census, while Kist communities numbered less than 6,000, there were approximately 133,000 and 182,000 Muslims in Adjara and Kvemo Kartli (the latter being where most ethnic Azerbaijanis are concentrated), respectively, forming the bulk of the country’s almost 11 percent Muslim population.

While both Adjarans<sup>1</sup> and ethnic Azerbaijanis can be categorized together as large proportions of the national Muslim population, the Adjaran case is particularly

unique given that population at least nominally belongs to the titular Georgian majority.

### Local Grievances

Adjara, a historically Muslim region in the southwest of the country, borders Turkey to the south and the Black Sea to the west. Like much of historical western Georgia, Adjara was at times a part of the Ottoman Empire. Although it was not formally integrated into what was to become the Republic of Turkey like other historical Georgian regions like Tao-Klarjeti, it was socially integrated into the Ottoman imperial body politic to a larger degree, especially through religious conversion. While formally ceded by the Republic of Turkey to the Soviet Union in the 1921 Treaty of Kars, Adjara was afforded treaty-bound autonomy to enshrine its unique Muslim character—technically enforceable by Turkey. To this day, Adjara remains legally an autonomous republic within Georgia, with its own parliament and executive government bodies.

However, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Adjara’s unique Muslim character appeared to be at risk. Between decades of Soviet-enforced state atheism and the revival of the Georgian Orthodox Church in the aftermath of Georgian independence, Adjara transformed from a traditionally Muslim-majority region into one that was majority Orthodox Christian. By the early 2000s, only an estimated 30 percent of Adjaran residents were Muslim.<sup>2</sup>

The rapid decline of the Adjaran Muslim population remains a source of controversy. According to a dominant, majoritarian (i.e. Christian) telling of events the post-Soviet Adjaran population freely converted to Christianity out of a sense of national pride, given the ancient Georgian Orthodox Church’s celebrated status as a longstanding totem of Georgian civilization. By contrast, Muslim Adjarans tend to describe conversions as being motivated—or coerced—by economic deprivation. The truth, though difficult to ascertain in full given the political and socio-economic chaos in newly independent Georgia, is likely somewhere in the middle. Regional scholar Thomas Liles convincingly argues that ordinary Adjarans’ quest for social mobility and full inclusion into the Georgian nation was a potent driver for conversion. It is likely that some element of social or economic coercion—both indirect, in the case of pro-Orthodox biases in state and public institutions (such as schools), and even more direct means—also played a role.

1 In the context of foreign fighters, “Adjarans” is being used to describe all ethnic Georgian Muslims, due to their predominant concentration in Adjara. Although most Adjarans are not Muslims, and significant concentrations of Georgian Muslims do exist elsewhere in the country—particularly in Samtskhe-Javakheti, Guria, and Tbilisi—this term is being used for simplicity’s sake.

2 Only estimates exist due to the 2002 Georgian Census not including religious affiliation in its questionnaire.

However, there is evidence that Islam is increasingly reemerging in Adjara. According to the 2014 Census, approximately 40 percent of Adjarans consider themselves Muslim—a sharp increase from the 30 percent estimated in the early 2000s. Several factors may be contributing to Islam’s revitalization in Adjara. First, the economic and political situation in Adjara has improved immensely since the early 2000s. Following both the 2003 Rose Revolution and Adjara’s own miniature revolution in 2004, which toppled the kleptocratic pseudo-separatist regime of Aslan Abashidze, Adjara became more open to both the rest of Georgia as well as the wider region, and specifically Turkey.<sup>3</sup> Second, and relatedly, nearby Turkey became far more engaged and integrated with social and economic life in Adjara. Under Abashidze, despite his personal Muslim heritage, Adjara was not well integrated into the nearby Turkish economy. It was only after his fall in 2004, and an increasingly assertive Turkey under the Islamist Justice and Development Party (elected in 2002), that Adjara found itself transformed from a Nakhchivan-like hermit statelet into a mutual gateway for Georgia and Turkey. Third, Adjara’s increasingly stable environment also facilitated an influx of Islamic charity activity and funding from Turkey and Gulf States, which conducted social outreach and contributed to the construction of mosques and madrassas.

However, Islam’s increasingly assertive profile in Adjara has elicited a strong pushback in Adjara and in the country overall. Perhaps no controversy exemplifies local Christian–Muslim tensions more clearly than the conflict over proposals to build a second mosque in Batumi, the Adjaran capital. Batumi’s existing Orta Jame Mosque has reportedly far exceeded its capacity, but efforts by both the local Muslim community and sympathetic governments abroad (and particularly Turkey) have failed to finalize an agreement for construction of a second mosque, which has inspired protests and backlash from the local Christian community.

Other recent controversies have also fueled tensions. Ahead of parliamentary elections in 2012, Georgian Dream (GD) candidate Murman Dumbadze—who would later attain the post of Vice Speaker of Parliament, and later be expelled from GD—railed against Turkish influence in the republic and called for any new mosque to be “bulldozed.” He also led anti-Muslim protests in the region after winning his seat in 2013. In 2014, Orthodox nationalist activists began protest-

ing against the planned establishment of a Madrasa in the seaside town of Kobuleti, culminating in a pig’s head being nailed to the door of the building intended for the madrasa. More recently, in March 2017, riots broke out in Batumi when dozens of locals violently protested against the perceived heavy handedness of a local police chief. According to some accounts, the new police chief of Adjara had made anti-Muslim remarks, inflaming tensions between the longstanding Georgian Muslim community and the now-dominant Orthodox Christian population.

### Recruitment Grist

While day-to-day interactions between Christian and Muslim residents in Adjara is generally described as good, the occurrence of regular high-profile incidents and the qualified position of Adjaran Muslims within the Georgian nation are a potent substrate within which extremist messaging has the potential to take root. The IS “caliphate” appears to have come to a similar conclusion; in late 2015 and early 2016, IS released its first two (and hitherto only) Georgian-language propaganda videos seemingly specifically aimed to recruit disaffected Adjarans. The videos, featuring Georgian Muslim fighters from Adjara and other western Georgia communities, highlighted local grievances and threatened to bring the caliphate to Georgia. The videos were notable in that IS had not released, at that point, any official propaganda video in the Georgian language—despite the relatively high level that Georgians (albeit from Pankisi) had played in the conflict<sup>4</sup>—and had chosen to do so aimed at Adjaran communities particularly.

While perhaps the most significant, the 2015/2016 videos were not the first or only signs of Adjaran radicalization. In late 2013, just as IS was establishing itself as a global “brand,” a Georgian-language Facebook page appeared for the “Islamic Republic of Adjara,” showing a series of graphics depicting the autonomous region as an independent, Salafist Islamic republic, and calling on Adjara’s Muslim population to engage in violent jihad towards this end. Within weeks, it had been deleted.

In 2014, Ahmad al Jurji (Tamaz Chaghalidze), a self-declared IS fighter in Syria from Adjara, posted a home-made video where he issued threats against Georgia in his capacity as an IS fighter. Between 2014 and 2015, Chaghalidze followed his initial video with a series of other web-based posts and even an interview for an Adjaran newspaper, where he launched bromides against Geor-

3 Under Abashidze, Adjara never declared itself independent or separate from Georgia, but it was largely governed separately as a virtual parallel state. Security checkpoints and passport controls regulated traffic not only in and out of the country, but with other regions of Georgia as well.

4 This is particularly noteworthy given that while Kists are correctly regarded as being part of the wider Chechen cultural space, Russian-language fluency in Pankisi—particularly among younger generations—is relatively limited. The primary second language (after Chechen) is Georgian.

gia's Christian majority, specifically over anti-Muslim bigotry, societal isolation, and coercion at the hands of the Orthodox Christian majority. In one telling online threat, Chaghalidze railed against Christians offering food and goods to deprived Adjaran Muslims in exchange for their conversion to Christianity. While the veracity of such claims is difficult to assess, they were notable for their specificity to the Adjaran Muslim context, and likely reflect some element of local Muslim popular perception. In late 2015, IS announced the formation of the "Vilayat Gurjistan" (Islamic Province of Georgia) led by Kist emir Al Bara Pankiski, which included Chaghalidze and an assortment of both Kists and Adjarans.

To date, fewer than ten Adjarans have been confirmed as combatants in Syria, though there are likely considerably more. In an interview, Chaghalidze once claimed as many as 200 Georgian speaking fighters were fighting in Syria, including many Adjarans. While this figure is almost certainly inflated, Georgian analyst Mamuka Areshidze claimed as early as 2014 that ten Adjarans were fighting in Syria, and it is possible that many Adjarans that may be fighting in Syria primarily do so with Turkish speaking battalions, as many Muslim Adjarans—particularly in the more conservative highlands—speak Turkish fluently.

### Risks and Opportunities

Signs of an Islamic reawakening in Adjara, particularly one that is more globalized, combined with ongoing ethno-religious marginalization, societal isolation, high poverty rates, and a preexisting narrative of Orthodox Christian repression make Adjara seemingly fertile ground for radicalization. Its relatively large population, interconnectedness with nearby Turkey, and demonstrated IS interest—through high production value videos and the creation of Vilayat Gurjistan (VG) specifically including known Adjaran fighters—would seem to suggest that Adjara is at serious risk of militant Salafist growth and potential conflict.

#### *About the Author*

Michael Hikari Cecire is an international affairs and security analyst. An International Security Fellow at New America, he has extensively researched and analyzed security and extremism issues in Eurasia. His recent publications have appeared in *Caucasus Survey*, *Orbis*, *Demokratizatsiya*, and *E Cadernos CES*, and his work is regularly featured in a variety of media outlets. Cecire is also a Fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute, and was the managing co-editor of *Georgian Foreign Policy: The Quest of Sustainable Security* (2014).

However, extremist penetration is not necessarily a foregone conclusion—at least not one driven by IS. Since 2016, IS has seen its position in both Iraq and Syria severely degraded, and IS strongholds such as Kobane, Palmyra, and Mosul have recently fallen, while its "capital" in Raqqa appears to be on the brink of a multinational combined arms assault. With these territorial setbacks, the IS "brand" of victory, fueled by rapid battlefield successes in 2014–2015, has also been powerfully undermined, likely permanently. Despite VG's founding, there is little indication of IS ascendancy in the Caucasus, and VG itself (like other such non-Levant IS "provinces") may have been formed not from a position of strength, as has been commonly interpreted, but a reorganization into decentralized, cell-based command structures—not unlike the IK model it rapidly overtook in years past—as a means of self-preservation.

Meanwhile, in Adjara itself, the everyday reality for most Muslim residents has not been one of North Caucasus or Central Asia-style state repression, and in many respects Islam is being practiced more openly and freely in Adjara (and Georgia overall) than it ever has in the post-independence era. At the same time, material prosperity has been improved considerably for the majority of Adjarans in important respects; while jobs continue to be an issue facing the country overall, a Turkish-driven construction and tourism boom in the lowland coastal areas (and particularly in Batumi) has provided new opportunities for many Adjarans—and arguably more for those with Turkish-language fluency, who are more likely than not to be Muslims. In addition, transportation, medical care (Georgia recently instituted a popular universal health insurance program), and education infrastructure is widely perceived as steadily improving.

This is not to say that extremist militancy is not possible in Adjara, or that local Muslim community grievances are not genuine. Rather, Islamist radicalism faces genuine international and local headwinds that can be either augmented—or undermined—by Georgian central authorities and their partners.