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HOMO JIHADICUS

ISLAM IN THE FORMER USSR
AND THE PHENOMENON OF THE POST-SOVIET
MILITANTS IN SYRIA AND IRAQ

Maciej Falkowski, Józef Lang

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Centre for Eastern Studies

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KEY POINTS

1. The post-Soviet area, along with the countries of the Middle East, North Africa and Western Europe, have become one of the main global „exporters” of Islamic militants. This is not the first time Muslim emigrants from former USSR states have participated in armed conflicts outside of their states’ borders (it has mainly been the Central Asian militants fighting in Afghanistan and Pakistan). However, it is only during the civil war in Syria that it has become a mass phenomenon. This is particularly visible in the case of the Caucasus. Currently on the territory of Syria, and to a lesser extent of Iraq, there are several thousands of foreign fighters from the post-Soviet states. They either join the local militant groups or they create their own ones, which are often up to several hundred strong, have commanders of their own and play an important role in the local jihad ecosystem.
2. The causes of the war migration from the former USSR states to the Middle East have their roots in the dynamic changes taking place inside Islam in the post-Soviet area: primarily the growth of Salafism and militant Islam, as well as the internationalisation and globalisation of the local Islam. The deep political, economic, social and ideological changes which Muslims underwent after the collapse of the USSR, led to the creation of a specific group within them, for which Islam in its radical form became the main element of their identity. *Homo sovieticus*, without fully eradicating his Soviet part, became *Homo jihadistus* – who not only identifies himself with the global Ummah, but is also ready to leave his country and join jihad beyond its borders in the name of the professed ideas.

The departures are being directly caused by the events in the Middle East sparked by the Arab Spring (closely followed by the post-Soviet Muslims) and the durable character of the war in Syria. The decisions to leave are aided by the poor socio-economic situation in the countries of origin and repressions against Salafists, primarily in the Central Asian states, Russia and Azerbaijan. Other factors are also important, including: large-scale propaganda by Jihadists (mainly on-line), the special meaning Syria – and more broadly the Levant – has for Islam, the close ties between the Caucasus and Syria and between the Central Asia and Turkey, and finally the ease of access to the conflict zone.

3. Despite the alarmist forecasts disseminated by the governments and media of the post-Soviet states, in the short-term perspective the departures of Jihadi volunteers for the Middle East (and the likelihood that they will not

return) is stabilising the countries of origin, since its result is the exodus of the most radical individuals. This phenomenon is *de facto* in accordance with the interests of the authorities. The case of the Northern Caucasus, where the departure of some of the militants and shift of the stream of recruits to Syria contributed to establishing a relative stability during recent years, is symptomatic.

4. The impact of the phenomenon of volunteers departing to jihad in Syria and Iraq will not necessarily lead to a rise in security threats in the post-Soviet area in the long-term perspective, either. Many signs show, that at least for a major part of those leaving, it is a permanent migration – even were the conflict to end, they will not return to their homeland, but will rather move on to another hotspot in the Muslim world. Increasing numbers of militants who are taking their families to Syria with them implies exactly that. The precedent which illustrates this phenomenon are the militants of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), who at the turn of 1990’s and 2000’s migrated from Central Asia to Afghanistan, and later on to Pakistan’s Waziristan, where they joined the global jihad. Despite the fact that the possibility of them returning is constantly being raised, it has never materialised. Regardless of this, the issue of militants fighting abroad will be certainly utilised by the authorities as a scare factor in both internal politics (as an excuse to limit civil rights or to combat the opposition) and in geopolitical power play (for example by Moscow to justify the need of closer security ties with particular states, or in its relations with the West), just as it has been in the case of the IMU and the Afghan threat for Central Asia.
5. The security challenges related to the participation of citizens of former USSR countries in jihad in the Middle East can increase only should serious destabilisation occur in one of the post-Soviet states (for example Uzbekistan or Russia). This could mean some of the militants would indeed return, while the experience and contacts with international terrorism which they gained, could make them more dangerous than at present. Currently, however, this scenario seems far from likely: it seems impossible to stabilise the situation in the Middle East over the coming years, the perspective of collapse of one of the post-Soviet states is not evident, and, finally, the main enemy of the international Jihadists is not Russia or one of the former USSR states, but rather the Middle Eastern regimes (Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Iran etc). Furthermore, the returning Jihadists cannot count on wide support inside from their countries’ societies, which are rather critical of the demands of the radicals.

6. There is a current trend in the region's countries (and beyond the region) which is present in both politics and the media as well as the analytical reports focused on the post-Soviet area to overplay the threat stemming from volunteers travelling to jihad in Syria in Iraq. This trend consists in exaggerating the Islamic threat in the former USSR states in general, and those associated with Salafism and militant Islam in particular. The apocalyptical forecasts regarding Islamic radicalism in the post-Soviet area, despite the media attention they gain and their political utility, have never been proven to match the reality on the ground, especially in the case of the Central Asian region. In almost all of the post-Soviet states, Islamic radicalism does constitute a problem, including in the security dimension. It is, however, a marginal phenomenon - only a minute part of the socio-political reality in this area, and one of many Islam-related problems, which significantly vary not only between particular countries, but also regionally within them.

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this report is to examine a phenomenon underway since 2011 which involves the departure of volunteers from the post-Soviet area (the Caucasus, Central Asia, the Volga region, Azerbaijan, Crimea) to Syria and Iraq, where they participate in the civil war on behalf of various Jihadi formations, including Islamic State. The subject of analysis is the origin of the above phenomenon, its forms and scale as well as the probable consequences for the states which these militants originate from. The report also contains a descriptive part dealing with particular units, leaders, data about the size and ethnic composition of the militant formations, routes and means of getting to Syria, recruitment methods etc.

It is not enough to simply describe the militant groups active in the Middle East to understand the phenomenon being analysed and to verify the actual threats which it poses to the post-Soviet area. A close examination of the social, religious and political background they originate from, and within which they should be classified is necessary, as well as the overall situation with Islam, including Islamic radicalism, in the post-Soviet states, and the challenges associated with this issue. Therefore this publication is both a description of the phenomenon of the travels to jihad, as well as an attempt at a general reflection on the situation of Islam in the former Soviet Union.

Almost a quarter of a century has passed since the fall of USSR and the situation in the former Soviet republics differs, at times diametrically. Despite this, it seems appropriate to draw a distinction between the volunteers from the post-Soviet states and the militants from other Muslim countries. The immense Soviet heritage, the common usage of Russian as a *lingua franca* between different ethnicities, and the presence, in various forms, of all the former USSR states in Russia's field of influence (political, informational etc.), mean that the post-Soviet area can still be viewed as a distinctive geopolitical and civilisational sub-region. Proof of this can be seen in the existence of an informal network of Salafis from the former USSR states, which is based on the community of the Russian language and a similar cultural code, and inside which a constant flow of people, ideas and information occurs. The phenomenon of post-Soviet militants in Syria and Iraq itself can serve as a further example. These militants, as with the Salafis in the former USSR states, create a community distinguishable from those of volunteers from the other Muslim states, and one way in which it expresses itself is through the establishment of separate militant groups.

The characteristics and complexity of Islam, as well as the multitude and ambiguity of the terms present in the academic publications regarding the modern currents of this religion, create the need to introduce stipulative definitions which will be used in this report to describe the various aspects of the situation of Islam. Amongst the most important ones are:

Salafi Islam – a religious current in Sunni Islam inspired by the “pure” Islam, i.e. the one which was practiced in the first decades of its existence. Salafism calls for a return to the roots, it consists of far-reaching legalism and a rejection of those traditions which don’t have a basis in the Koran or the Hadith. Salafism as a current and phenomenon is very heterogeneous: it can have both an apolitical and peaceful character (Salafi communities concentrated on the religious life) as well as a political and militant one (the struggle, including by means of armed conflict, for the establishment of an Islamic state).

Islamic fundamentalism – a political current in Islam which came to life after the Muslim world’s contacts with the West, it is Muslims’ reaction to modernisation and westernisation. It holds that religious factors have priority over secular ones and encompasses the notion of creating an Islamic state as well as basing the legal system on the Koran. Islamic fundamentalism is present both in Sunni and Shia Islam. In the case of Sunni fundamentalism, it is possible to track the roots of many fundamentalist movements to Salafi Islam, hence the two contemporary oftentimes overlap.

Militant Islam/Islamic radicalism – pursuing an armed and/or terrorist struggle in the name of the professed faith, in order to achieve political goals (in most cases this equates to establishing an Islamic state).

In this report the term “Wahhabism”, which has a highly negative connotation in the post-Soviet discourse on Islam, is not used. The term is utilised in propaganda to stigmatise any independent Islam (in practice this means any form of Islam not related to the official one), especially Salafism. It is often juxtaposed in opposition to the so-called “traditional Islam” (associated with the official and folk Islam, in some regions also with Sufism). In reality Wahhabism is a currently existing historic school of interpretation of the Islamic law and an 18th century socio-religious movement which laid the foundations for Saudi Arabia.

The names of groups and organisations appearing in the report will be transliterations from the original with included translation. In case of the militants

fighting in Syria and Iraq, as well as their leaders, their *nom de guerre* (Arabic: *kunya*) will be used and, if possible, their actual names will be provided.

The report is based on a broad-spectrum of sources: from academic research and analytical reports, through press publications, materials from news agencies and field studies conducted by the authors, to materials produced by the post-Soviet militants themselves. The latter materials, due to their character, often change their Internet addresses, are being blocked or embedded on forums, some of which require prior registration – all of which often makes their subsequent verification difficult.

I. FROM THE RETURN TO FAITH TO JIHAD: SALAFISM AND MILITANT ISLAM IN THE POST-SOVIET AREA

The primary reasons of the mass influx of volunteers from the former USSR states to Syria and Iraq lie in the dynamic growth of Islam which took place in the post-Soviet area following the collapse of the USSR. The rapid revival of religious life which took place there, led not only to a rise in the number of devout Muslims, the spread of religious practices etc, but also to the creation of numerous Islamic organisations, currents and groups, including those which were actively engaged in political life. After decades of separation from global Islamic life, Muslims living in the post-Soviet area once again became a part of the global Muslim community. This activated the turbulent process of the clash between the new Islamic tendencies, ideas and currents. Two processes in the post-Soviet Islam are key to understanding the phenomenon of the exodus to Syria and Iraq: the rise of Salafism, which created the necessary ideological foundation, and of militant Islam, which generated individuals and entire milieus possessing significant combat experience and ready to participate in armed struggle in the name of Islam.

1. Soviet and post-Soviet Islam

In the Soviet Union practising Islam was obstructed and during some periods it was even combated. Official Islamic institutions did exist¹, but they were closely associated with the state and were under constant surveillance by the security apparatus. Their main role was to control Muslim communities and they did not thus serve the purposes typical for religious institutions. The communist authorities were not capable of fully liquidating Islamic practices², but their fight against Islam was effective enough to sever the ties between the Soviet Union's Muslims and the rest of the Islamic world (which was going through dynamic changes), to completely dismantle the system of religious education³ and to hinder public religious practices. All of this led to

¹ Spiritual Boards of Muslims – in Ufa for the European part of the USSR and Siberia, in Makhachkala for the Northern Caucasus, in Baku for the South Caucasus and in Tashkent for Central Asia and Kazakhstan.

² In some areas Islam was practised in secret during the entire existence of the USSR. Examples of this include the Chechen Sufi brotherhoods or Islam in the rural areas in Tajikistan or the Uzbek part of the Fergana Valley.

³ In the case of Islam, which as a religion constitutes also a complete legal framework, it was of significant importance. In the USSR the system of Islamic education was liquidated. In Central Asia only one madrasa in all of the USSR existed (the Mir-i Arab madrasa in

a reduction of the former religious customs, only some of which survived as folk/cultural traditions.

These conditions in the context of the fall of the USSR, the influence of Perestroika, and the deep crisis of the Soviet society, led to the first Islamic institutions independent of the government starting to form. They constituted a *de facto* new, non-traditional (in the Soviet understanding) kind of Islam, which searched for external inspiration (but often also referred to the old local traditions and customs). The fall of the USSR made it possible to study in Islamic educational centres abroad, enabled the influx of foreign religious literature etc. In a short time span it imported to the post-Soviet area the ideological disputes which were present in the Islamic world for most of the twentieth century. Also “traditional” Islamic currents (for example Sufism) gained new followers and evolved, while their adherents and preachers were forced to adapt to the new, post-Soviet reality. Combined with the general renaissance of religion in the former USSR states, it led to the simultaneous creation and parallel development of various, often conflicting, Islamic currents, groups and institutions (amongst them the so-called Spiritual Boards of Muslims, political parties, Salafi communities, social organisations, Sufi brotherhoods, militant and/or terrorist groups). Aside from Salafism and militant Islam which are described later on, it is possible to isolate the following currents/forms of Islam present in the post-Soviet area: cultural Islam, folk Islam, official Islam, Sufism and the Islamic fundamentalism.

The least active form of Islam is cultural Islam, which formed during the USSR’s existence. Its essence is the identification of the professed faith with ethnicity – the perception and self-perception of the representatives of particular ethnic groups (for example Kazakhs, Azerbaijanis or Turkmens) as Muslims by definition, regardless of whether they practise Islam or possess any religious knowledge. Despite Islam’s intensive growth, cultural Muslims are dominant amongst the followers of Islam on the post-Soviet area (similarly to “cultural Christians”, for example ethnic Armenians or Russians)⁴.

Folk and official Islam are also a continuation of Soviet Islam. Folk Islam is an unintellectual Islam, yet not one lacking ritual, thought this is often limited to

Bukhara), but its alumni should rather be viewed as being state officials than clerics. Adeeb Khalid, *Islam after Communism. Religion and Politics in Central Asia*, Berkeley 2007, p. 110.

⁴ Cara Aitchison, Peter Hopkins, Mei-Po Kwan, *Geographies of Muslim Identities. Diaspora, Gender and Belonging*, Hampshire 2007, pp. 141-165.

the unreflective practice of particular religious customs and commandments, such as celebrating the most important Muslim holidays, circumcision, not eating pork, the cult of the holy sites etc. In Soviet times folk Islam was the basic form of Muslim religious worship⁵. After the fall of the USSR it did undergo some evolution and gained additional elements, for example the possibility of attending the pilgrimage to Mecca, more frequent participation in prayers etc.

Official Islam is a more complex form of Islam, with an intellectual base of its own. It is the Islam propagated by the official Muslim clerical apparatus, linked with the state authorities (and is often even created and institutionally controlled by the latter). In the post-Soviet settings these are called “Spiritual Boards of Muslims” (for example of Dagestan, Georgia or Kyrgyzstan); they are the heirs of similar institutions which functioned in the USSR and Tsarist Russia. The essence of official Islam is its subservient relation to the state authorities, rather than belonging to a particular branch or current of Islam. In some countries (for example in Georgia and Azerbaijan) both Sunni and Shia communities are formally governed by the same board, while in the eastern part of the Northern Caucasus these institutions are dominated by the Sufi brotherhoods. The representatives of official Islam are usually hostile towards any forms of Islam independent from them, especially towards Salafism⁶.

Sufism – a mystical current in Islam – is also present in the post-Soviet area. It is externally expressed by the activities of the Sufi orders. Sufism emphasises the need of a non-rational, mystical discovery of God, as well as the importance of tradition and spiritual leaders, who act as intermediaries between man and God. Additionally, the Sufi orders were an important element of the social structure and traditionally participated in the political life. Sufism is particularly well developed in Chechnya, Dagestan, southern Kazakhstan, the Fergana Valley and Tajikistan. Amongst the most important Sufi orders active in the former USSR area are: Qadiriyya (Chechnya), Naqshbandi (Dagestan, Central Asia), Yasawiya and Kubrawiya (Central Asia)⁷.

Politically engaged, fundamentalist Islam has also established itself in the post-Soviet area. Its first occurrence was the establishment of the Islamic

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Np. <http://www.zakon.kz/4577601-agentstvo-po-delam-religii-rk-kto-takie.html>

⁷ Maria Elisabeth Louw, *Everyday Islam in Post-Soviet Central Asia*, New York 2007, pp. 42-62, and <http://www.caucasus-survey.org/vol1-no2/downloads/The-politicization-of-Sufism-in-Chechnya.pdf>

Renaissance Party (IRP) at the summit of Soviet Muslim intellectuals in June 1990 in Astrakhan. The party's main goal was to synchronise legislation with sharia. In the later period the IRP itself did not play any significant role, yet for many of its members it was an important formative experience⁸. The occurrences of Islamic fundamentalism also include the events in the Uzbek part of the Fergana Valley in 1990, when the Islamist organisation Adolat (Justice) took over the power at the local level and tried to restore public order by enforcing compliance with basic sharia rules (the fight with alcoholism and prostitution). Despite Adolat's attempts to hold negotiations with the authorities, the organisation was viewed as serious threat and the authorities ultimately forcefully liquidated it⁹.

Currently the main occurrence of Islamic fundamentalism in the post-Soviet area is the activity of the Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT – Liberation Party) organisation¹⁰. Hizb ut-Tahrir is formally a political party whose aim is to re-establish the Caliphate and which decries the use of violence. Despite the Hizb ut-Tahrir's goal being rather radical, the organisation itself as well as its methods fit within the political spectrum, as can be seen in the fact that it functions legally inside the European Union and United States, and for an extended period of time its headquarters was located in London (currently in Beirut)¹¹. In the post-Soviet area Hizb ut-Tahrir enjoys considerable popularity amongst Muslim communities, but everywhere except for Ukraine and Georgia it is illegal and membership in it is punishable¹². The persecutions of HT members result in many of them (usually during their stay in prison) becoming radicalised and joining

⁸ Some of its branches (first of all the Tajik IRP) and individual activists (for example Dagestan's Abbas brothers and Magomed Kebekov) did play an active role in the political processes taking place after the fall of the Soviet Union.

⁹ Adolat's leaders invited in April 1991 the then leader of the Uzbek SSR Islam Karimov to show him their achievements in establishing public order based on sharia and to propose the transfer of experience to the rest of the country (all while recognising Karimov's authority). The meeting took place in December 1991. Karimov, already the president of independent Uzbekistan, was intimidated by the rising role of Islam, and as soon as he strengthened his position, he ordered liquidation of Adolat by force, including brutal repressions of its followers. More in: Stanisław Zapaśnik, „Walczący islam” w Azji Centralnej. Problem społecznej genezy zjawiska, Wrocław 2006, p. 80.

¹⁰ The other organisations play a marginal role (for example Takfir wal Hijrah) or have limited area of operations (for example Tablighi Jamaat in Kyrgyzstan which declares it is apolitical and yet actively pursues influence among the political elite).

¹¹ <http://www.hizb-ut-tahrir.info/info/>

¹² <http://anhor.uz/society/v-uzbekistane-raskrili-religiozno-ekstremistskuyu-organizaciyu-hizb-ut-tahrir> or <http://news.tj/en/news/trial-seven-alleged-hizb-ut-tahrir-activists-starts-khujand>

the ranks of militant Islamic organisations¹³ which paradoxically are hostile towards Hizb ut-Tahrir, as it criticises jihad and uses peaceful methods¹⁴.

2. Salafism in the post-Soviet area

Salafism is the most important and the most dynamically growing current of independent Islam in the post-Soviet area. It is an extreme current inside Sunni Islam, its characteristics include far-reaching puritanism and legalism (all actions must be justified by the Koran and Hadith), as well as a rejection of traditions, i.e. superfluities to the pure, primary Islam, which the Salafis refer to. Salafism is negatively or even hostilely viewed by the authorities of the post-Soviet states, and similarly it is in conflict with both the traditional folk Islam¹⁵ and official Islam¹⁶.

The rise of Salafism in the post-Soviet area was possible due to several factors: a partial reintegration of this area with the Islamic world, the emergence of religious leaders educated abroad and possessing the necessary religious knowledge, and also fast and simple access to the information on Salafism. Salafism's growth was also facilitated by several social factors: the identity crisis of the post-Soviet societies, the lack of a real and available religious alternative¹⁷, the poor socio-economic situation, the weakness of the state and, finally, the injustice and corruption of the authorities. At the level of individual and small local communities, Salafism works as an instant remedy for some of these problems. Post-Soviet Salafism is therefore a result of the internal social processes and authentic considerations, rather than of an external inspiration. It is a form of substituting the mechanisms of state and society, neither of which function properly in the post-Soviet reality. It is also important to bear in mind how

¹³ Statements of the IMU members, who formerly were Hizb ut-Tahrir members and served prison sentences for that can serve as proof of this. After being released they joined the IMU. Based on materials published by the IMU, available at: <http://www.jundurrahmon.biz/index.php/filmlar>

¹⁴ Based on statements of Tahir Yuldashev in IMU's release *Obrashcheniya 1*, available at: http://www.jundurrahmon.com/jundulloh_filmlar/rus_tili/obrashenie_1.avi

¹⁵ First of all with Sufi Islam, extremely severe conflict (often in the form of violence and terrorist attacks) can be seen in Dagestan. For example the murder of the Sufi Sheikh Said Afandi Chirkawi in August 2012.

¹⁶ Official Islamic institutions, endorsed by the authorities, exist in all the former USSR states.

¹⁷ Official Islam still remains under the strict control of the authorities, which in post-Soviet settings means that the official Islamic institutions are engaged in anti-Salafist propaganda, surveillance of independent groups and the corruption linked with organising the pilgrimages to Mecca (the cost of the pilgrimage reach several thousand dollars).

attractive Salafism (which is often viewed as the pure, most orthodox Islam) is for converts and individuals returning to faith (almost all post-Soviet Muslims can be treated as such). This results in a general rise in Salafism's importance worldwide (including in Europe).

In the post-Soviet area Salafism constitutes an amorphous, decentralised and multi-sided religious movement. It is a grassroots movement without a single leadership, although leaders who gather followers around themselves do exist. Salafism does not automatically translate into militancy – the view on armed jihad is one of the main rifts among the internally divided and diverse post-Soviet Salafists. No single social profile of a Salafist exists – both the educated and wealthy and the uneducated and poor, residents of large urban agglomerations and villagers are Salafists. One can derive only two main criteria of systematisation of the Salafists: the view on jihad and the so-called “folk Salafism”. Some of the post-Soviet Salafists (concentrated around militant organisations, such as the Caucasus Emirate) hold that jihad is a duty, while the majority hold that the current settings do not meet the requirements set in the Koran for the necessity of jihad¹⁸. The second criterion is the degree of knowledge of Salafism itself. While some of the post-Soviet Salafists are fluent in Russian (which is the language of communication of Salafists in the post-Soviet area), and try to enrich their religious knowledge¹⁹ and actively engage in ideological disputes (including ones within the Salafi community), the so-called folk Salafists profess a simplified version of Salafism, which is superficial and lacking the intellectual dimension. Its adherents are above all focused on the external signs of Salafism (long beard, trousers not covering the ankles etc.), and not on its theological aspects. Neither of these criteria are exact, since many variations exist – for example both educated and folk Salafists can be supporters of waging jihad.

It is hard to pinpoint the exact number of Salafists in the post-Soviet area, however it can be estimated at around several hundred thousand people. This makes them a minority amongst the post-Soviet Muslims, but there are a few regions where they dominate²⁰. In such regions Salafists often have their own mosques, in other places they pray at homes (more rarely, in Hanafi, Sunni mosques). In cities where there are Salafi communities (even though they there are still a minority amongst the local Muslims) Salafi organisations and

¹⁸ Jihad in Syria is different in this regard – see chapter II.

¹⁹ For example: <http://salaf-forum.com/>

²⁰ Some areas of Dagestan, Pankisi Gorge in Georgia.

institutions are active. Such centres of Salafism include Moscow, St. Petersburg and Makhachkala – in other cities Salafists act in a more informal manner. Despite relatively small numbers, Salafism is a dynamically growing movement (there are more young people among Salafists), whose followers actively utilise new technologies to proselytise²¹.

The reaction of the authorities to occurrences of Salafism in the post-Soviet area is generally negative. In some countries (Tajikistan, Uzbekistan)²² it is forbidden by law, in others (Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan) Salafists are persecuted with mixed intensity as potential/alleged terrorists²³. Only in two states of the region does Salafism not meet with a negative reaction from the authorities – in Ukraine (Crimean Tatars)²⁴ and in Georgia (Pankisi Gorge). The persecutions from the authorities usually lead to results opposite to those desired: instead of discouraging potential Salafists, they cause the radicalisation of entire Salafi communities. At times (for example in Kazakhstan) this even results in terrorist activity being undertaken by them. It is also important to bear in mind that the issue of threats stemming from radical Islam is being instrumentally utilised by the governments of these states to strengthen their position, combat opposition, retain a firm grip on society and to legitimise all of the above actions on the international arena²⁵.

The radicalisation of Salafists in Kazakhstan

The unprecedented series of terrorist attacks that took place in Kazakhstan in 2011 and 2012 serve as a vivid illustration of the process of radicalisation of Salafists due to actions taken by the authorities, as well as of the consequences of this. Salafism was burgeoning in Kazakhstan, in the south of the country and also its western part, where ties with the Salafists from Dagestan are visible. Kazakh Salafists were subject to persecution from the authorities (it is hard to determine whether it was planned state policy or merely the exploits of the local law-enforcement officers). This resulted in them migrating (for example the emigration of 200 Salafists to the Czech

²¹ For example Salafi internet sites, such as: <http://salafportal.ws/> or <http://сaлaф.рф>), social media (for example <http://vk.com/club10146481> and <http://vk.com/salafteam>) etc. Even some Salafi publishing houses exist, for example: <http://www.ummah.ru>

²² For example: <http://tajikta.tj/news/detail.php?ID=6108>

²³ See the box below “The radicalisation of Salafists in Kazakhstan”.

²⁴ The situation has changed diametrically after the annexation of Crimea by Russia.

²⁵ It is especially true in the case of Uzbekistan.

Republic in 2009²⁶ or the appearance of Kazakh volunteers in the ranks of the IMU and IJU – the Islamic Jihad Union²⁷). The situation changed at the turn of 2010 and 2011. At first the Salafists used their contacts with the representatives of the Caucasus Emirate to ensure that waging jihad in Kazakhstan was compliant with sharia (which shows their extensive legalism)²⁸. On 17th of May 2011 they conducted the first suicide attack on the headquarters of the National Security Committee (KNB) in Aktobe (the first terrorist attack in Kazakhstan)²⁹. During the next year a number of attacks aimed at the security forces took place in Kazakhstan (mainly in the western part of the country, but also in the vicinity of Almaty) resulting in a death toll of at least 40³⁰.

The attacks were not perpetrated by any terrorist organisation but by the local, radicalised Salafists, who acted in an atomised, grass-roots manner. Nevertheless, the international Islamic terrorist organisations did attempt to exploit the events in Kazakhstan for their benefit. Soon after the first attack a previously unknown organisation Jund al-Khilafah (the Soldiers of the Caliphate) took responsibility for it, and threatened to launch new attacks³¹. All evidence available, however, suggests that Jund al-Khilafah was a virtual entity, created by the Islamic Jihad Union acting on the behalf of al-Qaeda, in order to take advantage of the wave of attacks for propaganda purposes³². The Kazakh government was capable of quickly stabilising the situation by mass arrests and convictions of individuals suspected of terrorism (about 500 people). In the long term perspective one can observe Astana's engagement of official Islamic structures in form of the Spiritual Board of Muslims of Kazakhstan (SBMK) and the utilisation of peaceful

²⁶ http://www.rferl.org/content/Kazakh_Salafis_Face_Deportation_From_Czech_Republic/1380886.html

²⁷ http://www.sehadetzamani.com/haber_detay.php?haber_id=2498

²⁸ Sharia inquiry on the Ingush website of the Caucasus Emirate: <http://hunafa.com/2010/09/fatva-o-dzhixade-protiv-kazaxstanskoj-policii/> and <http://hunafa.com/2011/03/vopros-o-zakonnosti-voennyx-dejstvij-v-kazaxstane/>

²⁹ <http://www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php?st=1305649920>

³⁰ Further in: Józef Lang, Kazakhstan is combating Islamic terrorism, *OSW Analyses*, 17.10.2012, <http://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2012-10-17/kazakhstan-combating-islamic-terrorism>

³¹ <http://ansar1.info/showthread.php?t=36968>

³² The organisation was led by Abu Moez (Moezeddine Garsallaoui), a Swiss citizen of Tunisian descent, linked with al Qaeda – http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/10/jund_al_khilafah_emi.php

Salafi leaders who are respected throughout the Russian-speaking sphere³³. This turned out to be an effective (since then there have been no terrorist attacks in Kazakhstan) but uncommon practice in the post-Soviet area.

3. Militant Islam after the fall of the USSR

Militant Islam in the post-Soviet area underwent through a long evolution – from the participation of organisations with a declared Islamic character in the local armed conflicts which took place after the collapse of the USSR, to the modern, internationalised Islamic terrorist organisations. An important aspect of this phenomenon was its gradual internationalisation and globalisation, the most vivid example of which is the participation of post-Soviet Muslims in the jihad outside of their countries' borders – at first in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and then in Syria and Iraq.

The first conflicts where militant Islam appeared were the wars in Tajikistan and Chechnya. Both of these conflicts are often portrayed as a struggle between Islamic militancy and the state (especially the war in Tajikistan), yet despite the presence of Islamic organisations, religion did not play a significant role in them. It was treated rather instrumentally, as an important part of the ethnic identity (Chechnya) or as idea which could unite the anti-government opposition members and serve as a reference to the legend of Afghan mujahidin (Tajikistan). The conflicts, however, did play a key role in the establishment of militant, radical Islam in the post-Soviet area. In other words, it was the Islamic factor that was superimposed on the above conflicts (two of many which took place after the fall of the USSR), and it were these wars that enabled the establishment of radical Islamic militancy, not the other way around.

The civil war in Tajikistan³⁴, one of the sides in which was the Tajik Islamic Revival Party, was for the most part not an ideological conflict but rather a regional clan struggle for power in the newly established state, sparked off by a set of social, political and economic factors. Nevertheless, it was the first conflict in the post-Soviet area in which Islamic radicals had participated. The

³³ An example of this is Rinat abu Muhammad al Kazakhstani (Rinat Zaynulin), an Almaty-based Salafi preacher, who is popular in the whole Russian-speaking sphere. Zaynulin is against waging jihad on the post-Soviet area, and while fundamental in his message, is supportive towards the government, <http://salaf.kz/?p=870>

³⁴ The war started in 1992 and ended in 1997. It was the bloodiest conflict in the post-Soviet area, resulting in the death of about 100,000 people and generating 1.2 million refugees.

latter included both post-Soviet militants – such as the fugitives from the Uzbek Fergana Valley under the command of Juma Namangani – and foreign ones – primarily the unit led by Khattab, a former Saudi foreign fighter in Afghanistan, who recognised that the war in Tajikistan did not have a strictly Islamic character and so left for Chechnya³⁵.

After the end of the civil war in Tajikistan, Central Asia witnessed events showing the establishment of authentic radical Islamic militancy in the region. These were the establishment of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) in 1998 by the fugitives from the Fergana Valley and veterans of the Tajik civil war, as well as the so-called “Batken crises” (in 1999 and 2000)³⁶, caused by the IMU. Despite its name, the IMU had Islamic radicals in its ranks not only from Uzbekistan, but from the entire region. Its goal was the establishment of an Islamic state in Uzbekistan. This movement is recognised as a terrorist organisation and from the beginning of its existence it has had strong ties with the Afghan Taliban (which provided it with a safe haven in the northern Afghanistan) and al-Qaeda. In 2001 the IMU fought on the side of the Taliban against the Northern Alliance and the US forces in Afghanistan. During the war the movement suffered heavy casualties and was forced to flee to the Pakistani tribal areas (mainly to Waziristan).

The first Chechen war (1994-1996), which received much more international coverage than the conflict in Tajikistan, also did not have a religious character. It was a war for national independence in which Islam (mostly not of a fundamental, but rather Sufi kind) played a secondary role. It served above all as an addition to the national ideology and, to some degree, as a platform allowing for the support (mainly financial) of the Muslim world to be secured. Similarly the presence of a few foreign volunteers (for example the above mentioned Khattab) was positively viewed by the Chechen leaders, who treated Islam instrumentally, and whose main goal was the independence of Chechnya.

³⁵ Based on Khattab’s memoirs, available at: <https://ia601209.us.archive.org/o/items/TheMemoriesOfAmirKhattabTheExperienceOfTheArabAnsarInChechnya/Memories.pdf>

³⁶ IMU militant raids on the Kyrgyz Batken province, and in 2000 further fighting took place on the territory of Uzbekistan. The declarative goal of the militants was to initiate an Islamic revolution in the Fergana Valley, though seizing the Uzbek exclave of Sokh. The fighting took place in mountainous terrain. The IMU’s forces were about 300 strong in 1999 and about 600 strong a year later. Both of the raids ended with defeat for the IMU, and they resulted in the IMU being permanently resettled to the Afghan cities of Kunduz and Mazar-i Sharif, at that time controlled by the Taliban.

Militant Islam gained its political significance during the inter-war period (1996-1999), when Chechnya was a quasi-independent state (not controlled by Moscow, but lacking recognition on the international arena). At that time two parallel, yet at times overlapping, processes took place. On one hand some of the Chechen politicians and warlords (mainly those gathered around Shamil Basayev and Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev), due to both ideological reasons and political calculations, started to voice radical Islamic slogans, propagating the transformation of Chechnya into an Islamic state and the “liberation” of Dagestan from the Russian yoke. They cooperated with both foreign fighters and missionaries, as well as with Dagestani radicals (such as Bagauddin Kebedov, Adallo Aliyev and others). On the other hand the fundamentalist slogans became a cover for the actions of numerous criminal groups, which operated on a large scale in chaos-torn Chechnya, and whose activities were supported by the Russian intelligence services, which aimed to discredit the Chechen independence movement. When in 1997 Aslan Maskhadov, a secular politician representing the national independence ideology, was elected president, he tried to curb the influence of the radicals and combat the criminal gangs, but his power was too weak to achieve these goals.

The activities of the Chechen and Dagestani radicals, as well as the presence of organised crime gave Moscow the excuse to initiate the second Chechen war (autumn of 1999). Its direct causes were the incursion of Chechen and Dagestani militants on Dagestan, and a series of terrorist attacks in Russia (Moscow, Buynaksk, Volgodonsk), which were most probably organised by the Russian security services³⁷. The Chechen forces were crushed within several months and forced to turn to guerrilla warfare. Over the following years Islamic radicals began to take the lead in the fighting, while the conflict in the Northern Caucasus morphed from the Chechnya-only struggle for national independence to the jihad that lasts to this day and which encompasses other republics of the region (Dagestan, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria etc.). The culmination of the ideological evolution of the militancy was the liquidation of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria and establishment of the Caucasus Emirate in 2007³⁸.

³⁷ Such a scenario was revealed by the former FSB officer Alexander Litvinenko, who was killed by Russian intelligence services in 2005 in London.

³⁸ More on the above mentioned evolution in: Maciej Falkowski, Chechnya: Between a Caucasian Jihad and ‘hidden’ separatism, *OSW Point of View*, January 2007, http://www.osw.waw.pl/sites/default/files/punkt_widzenia_13.pdf and Wojciech Górecki, No change in the Russian Caucasus. The Winter Olympics amid a local war, *OSW Studies*, January 2014, http://www.osw.waw.pl/sites/default/files/praceosw-47-rosyjski_kaukaz_ang-net.pdf

The existence of a miniature Islamic quasi-state in the central part of Dagestan is also often regarded as a case of militant Islam in the 1990s – the so-called Kadar zone (several Dargin villages in the Buynaksk district, including Kadar, Karamakhi, Chabanmakhi). In reality the origins of establishing “free Islamic territory”, the introduction of sharia and the expulsion of the representatives of the Dagestani authorities from those villages, lie in the social problems (corruption, limits set on entrepreneurship, the persecution of inhabitants), which many believed could be solved by Islamic fundamentalism. The inhabitants of the Kadar zone resorted to armed struggle only after being attacked by the Russian army in September 1999³⁹.

On the eve of the civil war in Syria, post-Soviet radical Islamic militancy was concentrated around two forces – the Caucasus Emirate (IK) in the Northern Caucasus and the Central Asian Islamic radicals gathered in the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and Islamic Jihad Union⁴⁰, fighting in Pakistan and Afghanistan⁴¹.

The Caucasus Emirate

According to the militants’ propaganda, the Caucasus Emirate is an Islamic state, currently occupied by Russia. In reality it is a virtual entity which in the ideological dimension unites the clandestine Islamic militancy active in the Caucasus. It is headed by an emir; until April 2015 this was Dagestan’s Aliaskhab Kebekov aka Ali Abu Muhammad, who was killed in a special operation by the Russian security forces in Buynaksk, Dagestan. IK is a network organisation comprised of loosely associated autonomous guerrilla groups (operating within particular vilayats – virtual territorial divisions). Besides representatives of various ethnicities present in the Caucasus, IK has in its ranks volunteers from other parts of Russia, including ethnic Russians who have converted to Islam⁴². At several times the Caucasian militants perpetrated terrorist attacks inside Russia. The militants also actively engage in propaganda, mainly through the use of the

³⁹ More in: Enver Kisriev, *Islam i vlast’ v Dagestane*, Moscow 2004.

⁴⁰ Organisation created as a result of a split in the IMU in 2004.

⁴¹ More on the IMU and IJU in: Józef Lang, *The radical Islamic militants of Central Asia*, OSW Report, November 2013, http://www.osw.waw.pl/sites/default/files/report_the-radical-islamic-militants.pdf

⁴² For example the well-known Salafi leader – Said Buryatsky (Alexandr Tikhomirov), ethnically half Russian, half Buryat, convert to Islam, who at first advocated against the jihad in the Caucasus, but later joined the IK militants and was killed in 2010 in Ingushetia.

Internet⁴³. As a result of the brutal antiterrorist measures undertaken by the Russian security services and Chechnya's president Ramzan Kadyrov's units, as well as the schism which took place on the turn of 2014 and 2015 (renouncing loyalty to the emir and a substantial part of the combat groups swearing an oath to the leader of Islamic State), the Caucasus Emirate is currently in a severely weakened state.

The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and the Islamic Jihad Union

Radical Islamic militants from Central Asia are concentrated around two international terrorist organisations – the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan created in 1998, and the Islamic Jihad Union, which split from the IMU in 2004. After the fall of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in 2001 the IMU resettled to the Pakistani tribal areas, where it regained its strength and integrated into the network of Islamic terrorist organisations present there. Both of these organisations possess terrorist infrastructure (leadership, rear elements, training camps etc.) in Pakistan's Northern Waziristan⁴⁴, they are actively engaged in armed combat on the side of the Taliban in northern Afghanistan⁴⁵, and in the past have attempted to conduct terrorist attacks in the United States and Europe⁴⁶. Contrary to most Islamic terrorist organisations, the IMU does not have a unified religious ideology, and amongst its members there are also Islamic radicals who do not adhere to Islam's fundamentalist currents⁴⁷.

As a result of the civil war in Syria on-going since 2011, the influx of recruits to the IMU and the IJU has significantly decreased, yet these organisations still remain a serious security threat⁴⁸.

⁴³ Examples of this are websites such as: <http://hunafa.com/>, <http://vdagestan.com/> or the targeted at Western audience Kavkaz Center website – <http://kavkazcenter.com/eng/>

⁴⁴ As a result of the military operation of Pakistani forces underway since the summer of 2014 and aimed at combating the foreign fighters in the Northern Waziristan, some of the IMU's and IJU's infrastructure was destroyed. Members of these organisations are also relocating in large numbers to Afghanistan's Kunduz province, leading to a deterioration in the security situation in this province. <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/the-next-round-of-the-tug-of-war-over-kunduz/>

⁴⁵ The Taliban, as a Pashtun movement, were incapable of operating successfully in the northern parts of Afghanistan, inhabited mostly by Tajiks, Uzbeks and Turkmen. The IMU's engagement on the side of the Taliban resulted in a significant deterioration in the security situation in the previously peaceful north of the country.

⁴⁶ http://www.rferl.org/content/uzbekistan_united_states_obama_islamic_movement/244-80474.html

⁴⁷ More in: The radical Islamic, *op. cit.*

⁴⁸ As can be seen for example in the IMU's attack on Karachi airport on 8th of June 2014. As a result of the attack 36 people were killed, and the airport itself severely damaged. <http://www.>

Regardless of its goal of establishing an Islamic State in the Caucasus and a lively interest in jihad worldwide, until recently it was impossible to include the Caucasus Emirate in the global Jihad movement. Despite ideological proximity with other Jihadi movements (in Afghanistan or in the Arab world), the war in Caucasus had a local character – the Caucasian militants (especially Chechens) did not participate in armed conflicts in the other parts of the world, while foreign fighters were rarely present in the Caucasus⁴⁹.

The Central Asian Islamic radicals gathered in the IMU and IJU chose a different path – both of these organisations integrated into the international terrorist network in Afghanistan and Pakistan. While their leaders were still the militants from Uzbekistan, and their declared goal remained the establishment of an Islamic state in Central Asia, these organisations lost their Central Asian character and focused on fighting in Afghanistan and Pakistan on the side of the Taliban and al-Qaeda (treating Central Asia only as a source of recruits, rather than a theatre of operations). Their role as a training centre for foreign Jihadists is especially important – prior to the civil war in Syria the IMU and IJU were the main Islamic terrorist organisations recruiting Islamic radicals from Europe and the pioneers of such actions conducted on a large scale (both of these organisations also attempted to conduct terrorist attacks in Western Europe⁵⁰). The IMU and IJU were also active in producing Jihadi propaganda targeted at Islamic radicals in Europe – at its peak, as many as several hundred volunteers from Europe fought in their ranks, predominantly Germans (both German citizens – migrants from Muslim countries, and ethnic Germans who had converted to Islam)⁵¹.

All of the above factors enabled the post-Soviet area to become a recruitment ground for the Jihadists in Syria and Iraq. The changes taking place in this area during the last twenty five years resulted in the reintegration to the Islamic world of at least a part of post-Soviet Muslims, hence also their participation in

reuters.com/article/2014/06/11/us-pakistan-militants-idUSKBN0EM14L20140611 and <http://jundurrahmon.biz/index.php/text/bayonot/456-karochi-tayyoragohiga-bolgan-fidoiy-amaliyot-borasida-bildirish>

⁴⁹ For example the volunteers from Kazakhstan are an exception to this. <http://tengrinews.kz/crime/kazakhstanets-osujden-v-dagestane-v-sostave-diversionno-terroristicheskoy-gruppyi-255570/>

⁵⁰ In 2007 in Germany and in 2010 in several countries of Western Europe. An Albanian Islamic radical inspired by the attack perpetrated by the IMU inside Frankfurt airport in 2011, while IJU trained Mohammad Merra killed 7 people in Toulouse in 2012. More in: The radical Islamic, *op. cit.*

⁵¹ In total around 200 Germans. Besides Germans citizens of France, Holland, Spain, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and several other European states were also present. *Ibid.*

the processes and currents present in the Islamic world, including the radical ones associated with jihad. Additionally, the armed conflicts which took place after the fall of the USSR generated a peculiar group of individuals possessing combat experience, and in some cases (militancy in the Caucasus, the IMU), also radical Islamic beliefs. They not only served as a source of potential recruits, but mainly as a cultural role model of the modern post-Soviet jihad – this also enabled the phenomenon of mass departures of volunteers to Syria and Iraq.

II. ORIGINS OF THE INFLUX OF VOLUNTEERS TO SYRIA

The phenomenon of post-Soviet Muslims going abroad to participate in jihad is not a new one, but in the past it mainly involved the citizens of the Central Asian states and Azerbaijan, with Afghanistan and Pakistan being chief war-migration destinations (a small number of militants also volunteered for jihad in the Northern Caucasus). Hundreds of Uzbeks, Tajiks, Kazakhs and Kyrgyz, and to a lesser extent also Turkmen and Azerbaijanis, since the late 1990's have left their countries to participate in jihad, mainly, in the ranks of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (currently departures to Syria are more frequent)⁵². A number of Russian Muslims (mainly Tatars and inhabitants of the Northern Caucasus, but also ethnic Russians who have converted to Islam) also joined the ranks of the IMU, al-Qaeda and the Taliban, yet this phenomenon never became large scale⁵³. Excepting individual cases, Muslims from the Northern Caucasus and Georgia did not participate in the conflicts outside of their homelands (an exception to this rule was participation in 1992-1993 of the volunteers from the Northern Caucasus in the Abkhazian-Georgian war on the side of Abkhazia, though it was not the religion, but solidarity with the Caucasian brethren that served as the motivation). Now, though, the militants from the Northern Caucasus clearly dominate (both in terms of numbers and their position in the hierarchy⁵⁴) amongst the post-Soviet Jihadists in Syria and Iraq.

The phenomenon of mass departures (counted in the thousands) of the post-Soviet Muslims for the jihad (see the next chapter for statistics) calls for an attempt to answer what the reasons are for this phenomenon. Varying socio-political circumstances in each of the former USSR states and regions, as well as differing, at times diametrically, motivations guiding the volunteers leaving for jihad, make it impossible to create a single, typical profile of a post-Soviet Jihadist. Nevertheless, it is possible to produce a catalogue of the general conditions and personal motivations which lie behind both the described phenomenon and the departures of individual volunteers.

⁵² For further information about volunteers from the Central Asian states fighting in Afghanistan and Pakistan, as well as on the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan see: The radical Islamic, *op. cit.*

⁵³ Eight citizens of the Russian Federation fighting in Afghanistan on the side of the Taliban prior to 2001 were held in the Guantanamo Bay prison. The most famous Russian prisoner was Ayrat Vakhitov aka Salman Bulgarsky of Tatarstan. After spending several years in Russia (2004-2013) he joined the jihad in Syria.

⁵⁴ For example the high-rank of Omar Shishani (Tarkhan Batirashvili) in the ranks of Islamic State - he is the organisation's top military commander in Syria.

1. Ideological reasons

The primary cause, without which the described phenomenon could not come to exist, is the development and growth of the Salafi communities in the post-Soviet area, as well as their internationalisation and globalisation. The process, described in greater detail in the previous chapter, led to the establishment of strong, autonomous Salafi communities in all areas of the former USSR inhabited by Muslims. Despite this, everywhere, except for the Pankisi Gorge in Georgia and Crimea prior to the Russian occupation, Salafists face more or less harsh repressions from the state structures⁵⁵. The movement is developing dynamically – furthermore, in most cases it happens on an endogenic basis, without substantial external financial or organisational support⁵⁶. In some regions, such as Dagestan or Pankisi, Salafism is even becoming the main Islamic current amongst the younger generation.

With regard to the volunteers departing for the jihad in Syria and Iraq, the key role was played by the evolution of identity which those communities underwent – from the Soviet-system based identification with one’s ethnic group to the sense of belonging to the Ummah – the global Muslim community. Locally acting communities, with a mindset which does not extend beyond their countries’ or region’s borders, mainly due to the availability of modern communication technologies, transformed (in the ideological, not organisational dimension) into a network, operating above all in the former USSR, but to some extent also in the entire Islamic world. That did not mean they entirely shed their Soviet mentality, but that they rather intertwined it with the sense of community with the world of Islam. This change in self-identification enabled the creation of a peculiar group among the post-Soviet Salafists. For the members of this group, belonging to the Islamic world includes the need to participate in the jihad wherever they deem it to be justified. This *Homo jihadicus* is a link between the global radical Islam and the post-Soviet Muslim communities. Considering themselves to be part of the Islamic world, they can navigate inside the Islamic terrorist international. Simultaneously, retaining their Sovietness, they can effectively influence the post-Soviet Islamic communities,

⁵⁵ The scale and strength of repressions is different in all of the post-Soviet states and varies during different periods. Also some of the legislation discriminating the Salafists are difficult or even impossible to enforce (for example effective blocking of Internet services).

⁵⁶ Such ideological, financial and organisational support did take place in the 1990s, when Salafi activists from outside of the former USSR were active in the post-Soviet area. Currently, even if such actions do take place, they play a marginal role.

with whom they still have a common cultural code. It was the establishment of the phenomenon of *Homo jihadicus* which directly enabled the volunteers departing to Syria and Iraq in large numbers.

The Middle East, previously viewed by Soviet Muslims as an unfamiliar, foreign world, has become a homeland for the post-Soviet Salafists, while the events taking place there are just as important as those in their home countries (and at times even more so). This evolution is especially symptomatic in the case of the Chechens, who traditionally had regarded themselves as being unique and distinctive, and viewed the Arabs, Afghans and Turks as inferior, and now make up the spearhead of the post-Soviet volunteers in Syria and Iraq, fighting side by side with representatives of other ethnicities in the ranks of joint militant groups. This was made possible by the ideological evolution – from nationalism to Jihadism – that has taken place in the Chechen militancy over the course of the last twenty years⁵⁷.

Armed conflicts in the post-Soviet area were also an equally important facilitator of travels to jihad. In some of them Muslims fought under the banners of militant Islam (for example the IMU's raids in Central Asia). In others their participation was motivated by other factors, but the Islamic component was nevertheless present (the civil war in Tajikistan, both of the Chechen wars). These conflicts played a formative role in both the ideological (for example the Islamisation of the Chechen independence movement) and the military (gaining combat experience) dimensions. The Chechen conflict, which gradually evolved into the North Caucasian conflict (the struggle for the Caucasus Emirate), due to its long-lasting character, scale and ideological evolution (from a war for national independence to jihad) was of great significance in this dimension. The rise of militant Islam was also, at least to a certain extent, influenced by Russia's instrumental utilisation of it in the political power plays both domestically and in the post-Soviet area (for example the *de facto* support the Russian security services gave to the Salafi militant groups in Chechnya in 1996-1999, in order to destabilise the situation in the republic and gain an argument for a military intervention).

⁵⁷ Further on the above mentioned evolution in: Maciej Falkowski, Chechnya: Between a Caucasian Jihad and 'hidden' separatism, *OSW Point of View*, January 2007, http://www.osw.waw.pl/sites/default/files/punkt_widzenia_13.pdf and Maciej Falkowski, On the periphery of global jihad. The North Caucasus: the illusion of stabilisation, *OSW Point of View*, November 2014, http://www.osw.waw.pl/sites/default/files/pw_46_ang_kaukaz-polnocny_net.pdf

The development of globally-thinking Salafi communities with strong sense of solidarity with the Islamic Word, as well as the existence of the battle-hardened Islamic veterans of the post-Soviet conflicts, created the human resources base for the recruitment of those leaving for the Middle East. The existence of this social base served as the foundation for the phenomenon of mass departures for jihad.

2. Exceptionality of Syria in the Muslim perception

The participation of volunteers from the former USSR in the conflict in Middle East would not have achieved its large-scale character, if not for the special place that Iraq and especially Syria (more specifically *Sham* – the Levant – the region encompassing Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine) hold in the mindset of Sunni Muslims worldwide. Both of these states are regarded by Muslims as among the most important and holy places, subordinated only to Mecca and Medina (viewed through this lens, Afghanistan is a remote periphery of the Islamic world). It was Damascus (7th-8th centuries) and Baghdad (8th-13th centuries) that hosted the caliphate – the idealised Islamic state, which Islamic fundamentalists worldwide dream of restoring. The uniqueness of Syria is also caused by the Hadiths⁵⁸, according to which one of the many signs forecasting the apocalyptic times will be a war in this country, and also from here a new period of the advance of Islam will begin⁵⁹. Similarly, it is in Syria or Iraq, that the second coming of prophet Isa (Jesus) will take place, preceding the Day of Judgement. It is of real importance that the transcendence and special historic character of the jihad in Syria is deliberately emphasised in the propaganda aimed at recruiting volunteers for jihad, both by the organisations fighting there and by radical preachers supportive of it (for example Dagestan's Abu Omar Sasitlinsky).

Syria also has close ties with the Northern Caucasus. In the 19th century tens of thousands of the so-called *muhajirs* – Caucasian emigrants (predominantly Chechens, Circassians and Dagestanis) settled in this part of the Ottoman Empire after voluntarily or being ejected from the Russian-conquered Caucasus. Their communities, and links with the Caucasus, survive to the present day. The fact that Syria was one of the most popular destinations for studying abroad amongst the Caucasus's youth, is also of great importance. The reasons for that

⁵⁸ Religious texts recalling the life of the Prophet Mohammad – along with the Koran they are Islam's main basis for legal norms and traditions.

⁵⁹ For example Bukhari 6592, Tirmidhi 2243, Ibn Majah 4088.

were, paradoxically, the good Soviet, and later Russian, relations with Assad-ruled Syria, which was viewed by Moscow as a country where moderate Islam is dominant, hence the Russian authorities did not obstruct those wishing to go there to study. The effect of this was the establishment of a new, several thousand strong Caucasian diaspora in Syria (the largest being the Chechen and Dagestani ones), mainly in Damascus and Aleppo. Some of these communities had a Salafi character, which is why the first Caucasian volunteers who joined the jihad originated from them. The inhabitants of the Caucasus also frequently engaged in low-level trade and smuggling in Syria, for example during the Hajj (the buses with pilgrims, mainly from Dagestan, often travelled to Saudi Arabia via Syria, especially after the beginning of the war in Iraq in 2003).

One of the reasons for such a large scale of the described phenomenon is undoubtedly the unprecedented and dynamic character of the events taking place in the Middle East over the last couple of years. The Arab Spring, which began with the revolution in Tunisia and which was watched closely by post-Soviet Muslims, was viewed as the beginning of Islamic world's awakening, rousing it from the centuries-long stagnation and its dependence on the West. The prolonged war in Syria became, in the perception of most of the Salafi milieus, a "true" and "pure" jihad, which is to be supported by every pious Muslim, according to his capabilities⁶⁰.

The logistical issues also aid the departures to Syria. Getting there is not a problem for the inhabitants of most of the post-Soviet countries, with Turkey being the transit state. It has liberal visa policy, does not hinder crossing its border with Syria, and has, to put it mildly, an ambiguous policy towards the radical Islamic opposition in Syria. With regard to transportation, the Caucasus, Russia and Central Asia are also well-connected with Turkey.

3. Jihadist propaganda

The decisions to depart for Syria are most often made under the influence of Jihadist propaganda, which due to efficient utilisation of modern technologies (for example YouTube, social media, Twitter etc.) is abundant online (including Russian Islamic websites). The materials published there on the one hand depict the suffering inflicted on the Syrian people by the Assad regime, and on the other boast of the successes, heroism and „glory” of the militants. This propaganda

⁶⁰ While the jihad in the Caucasus was not so unanimously supported by the religious authorities, there is general consent regarding the validity of the jihad in Syria.

has a very strong effect on the potential volunteers – it is clear and easily understandable, because its authors are either their countrymen, or Jihadists from the other Post-Soviet states, possessing a similar cultural code and speaking Russian, a language still understood by most of the inhabitants of the former USSR.

4. Political reasons in the countries of origin

The origins of the departures for the jihad in Syria lie also, to some extent, in the political situation, which is true above all in the case of the Northern Caucasus. Frequent departures for Syria from this region are mostly the result of the jihad in the Caucasus itself being snuffed out, which was in part caused by brutal repressions conducted by the Russian security forces and the policies of Chechnya's president Ramzan Kadyrov (a combination of military, political and propaganda methods), which led to the militancy being marginalised and the situation being stabilised. The lack of perspectives for the prolonged armed struggle in the Caucasus as well as the degradation of the Caucasian militancy inclines both active militants and new volunteers to depart⁶¹. In the case of Chechens, the anti-Russian dimension of the war in Syria is also of some significance (the continuation of the struggle against Russia, through fighting Bashar al-Assad's regime which Russia supports).

In a broader sense, one condition that indirectly fuels the departures are the authoritarian political systems in some of the post-Soviet states, which also includes repressions against the independent Muslim groups, above all the Salafists (the Central Asian states, mainly Uzbekistan, as well as Azerbaijan and Russia, especially the republics of the Northern Caucasus). The persecutions are rarely the direct cause of the departures, they rather have the effect of radicalising Muslims, which creates the necessary social basis for future recruits. Azerbaijan is a classic example – intensifying authoritarianism channels social unrest and frustration into Islamic (mainly Sunni) radicalism⁶².

5. Solidarity with co-believers and religious duty

An important factor which serves as a motivation for departure to Syria is the solidarity with the jihadists and civilian victims of the conflict, an Islamic version of the struggle “for our freedom and yours”. In many Salafi circles,

⁶¹ Further in Maciej Falkowski, *Illusion...*, *op. cit.*

⁶² <http://carnegie.ru/eurasiaoutlook/?fa=56032&reloadFlag=1>

especially the extremely radical ones, the sense of legal religious duty is equally important (jihad as a religious commandment), and failure to fulfil it is essentially a sin. It is important to remember that armed jihad is regarded as the duty of every Muslim, but the key issue is defining whether or not a particular conflict has the status of jihad. Due to the structure of Islam (the lack of a single authority respected by all, or at least a majority of Muslims) this is a problematic issue, usually settled at the level of particular currents or even their branches (for example not every Salafist views the jihad in the Caucasus as mandatory)⁶³.

Dilemmas of the Jihadists in the Caucasus

The dispute about the jihad in Syria did not omit the Islamic clandestine militancy in the Caucasus, but nor did it concern whether it is an “actual” jihad (there was consensus regarding this). The leaders and militants of the Caucasus Emirate, as well as those who considered volunteering faced a dilemma regarding whether they are permitted to leave for the jihad in Syria when there is an ongoing war in the Caucasus. The militants’ leaders (above all the already deceased Dokka Umarov) held that for the inhabitants of the Caucasus, the jihad in their homeland is of greater importance (a claim they supported by verdicts of selected scholars) and forbade departure to the Middle East⁶⁴. Later on, facing the massive exodus of militants and new recruits to Syria, they had to revise the explicit ban, in order not to lose their credibility in the eyes of their supporters. The final ruling stated that if a Caucasian Muslim does not have the possibility to support the jihad in the Caucasus, then he can leave for Syria (the decision was especially important for the Chechen refugees residing in Europe)⁶⁵.

Similarly, the proclamation of the Islamic state by ISIS and the nomination of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as the caliph (June 2014) caused dissent in the

⁶³ Two types of jihad exist: offensive (declared by the Caliph in the name of the entire state) and defensive. The latter can take place only in lands inhabited by Muslims, and the decision concerning participation in it is *de facto* individually considered by every Muslim (obviously in reality the dominant view within the group is important). The religious authorities are of key importance in this matter – the issue of jihad’s mandatory status is also based on their (often contradictory) opinions. One however must also bear in mind that a Muslim can participate in a war which does not have the status of jihad, but in this case it is not obligatory.

⁶⁴ <http://nohchipress.info/2012/11/6995>

⁶⁵ <http://alishnad.com/?p=834>

ranks of militants, with even the Caucasian volunteers fighting in Syria and Iraq being divided on this issue. Immediately prior to the proclamation, the leader of the Caucasus Emirate Aliaskhab Kebekov had spoken critically about ISIS, calling for the Caucasian volunteers to remain independent and not interfere in the disputed between the groups fighting in Syria (in reality – between ISIS and the al-Qaeda-linked Jabhat al-Nusra). His explicit, categorical rulings and lack of moderation cost him his authority among the militants in the Caucasus and led to a deepening of the divisions between the Caucasian groups in the Middle East. The outcome of this was a schism inside the Caucasus Emirate (November-December 2014) with a substantial part of the militant groups in Dagestan and Chechnya swearing allegiance to the leader of Islamic State.

6. Personal motivations. Social causes

The individual character of the departures to Syria makes it necessary to examine the personal motivations which play the decisive role in the decision-making process before leaving. In this context the ideological issue is of significant importance. In some cases they are the decisive, especially with regard to wealthy individuals with families, a successful professional career or rich, influential parents, who nevertheless decide to leave their previous life and depart for Syria. In such cases the decision to leave is often preceded by converting or returning to Islam, the reason for which can most often be seen in existential dilemmas (a crisis of values, the search for the meaning of life) or tragedies. The scale of the phenomenon (conversion to Islam) is increasing, especially in Russia (estimates vary from several hundred even up to ten thousand people), where social crisis has catastrophic dimensions (crisis of family, a high divorce rate, drug addiction, alcoholism, suicide, orphaned or abandoned children, ubiquitous violence etc.)⁶⁶. One example of a person leaving a prosperous life in a post-Soviet state to join the jihad can be seen in the actions of colonel Gulmurod Khalimov – commander of Tajikistan's OMON (Special-Purpose Militia Units), who in April 2015 left for Syria and joined the ranks of IS⁶⁷. During his professional career he held a number of high-ranking

⁶⁶ According to the Russian Orthodox Church's data it is about 300 people, while Islamic organisations claim there are 10,000 converts. In both of the cases these are estimates. http://samara.orthodoxy.ru/Smi/Npg/051_12.html and <http://www.interfax-religion.ru/?act=news&div=17618>

⁶⁷ <http://www.avesta.tj/security/32994-polkovnik-gulmurod-halimov-obyavlen-v-mezhdunarodnyy-rozysk.html>

posts and participated in training abroad (including in Russia and the USA), while his departure for Syria was preceded by his return to Islam⁶⁸.

The actual motivation of a substantial part of the volunteers is rather frustration caused by poverty, unemployment, a lack of perspectives, the impossibility of self-fulfilment. It is often young people who decide to leave. On the one hand they have little to lose, on the other they stand little chance of finding a good job, having a successful career, saving money or even starting family of their own (in traditional societies of the Caucasus and Central Asia marriage must be preceded by achieving a social status allowing a man to provide for his wife and children). In this regard, the groups of increased risk are the internal (from the rural areas to big cities) and foreign migrants (for example the Central Asian labour migrants in Russia or Turkey), as well as Chechen refugees in Europe and Turkey.

The departure for jihad, while being extremely dangerous, is a chance to see the world, gain glory, to prove one's manhood and courage. In patriarchal societies, with a highly developed cult of manhood (especially in the Caucasus), this is of utmost importance. For many jihad is also a chance to liberate oneself from the oppressive social and family settings caused by a matrix of traditions, schemes and obedience towards one's elders. Another important factor is also the desire to avoid the generation clash (this is especially important in case of new converts to Islam since their parents are most often Soviet-raised people, who treat religion with dislike or even open hostility). Despite the tremendous risk, jihad also is an opportunity to gain riches through such means as the spoils of war, the seizure of estates in the conquered territories, or by smuggling to and from Turkey. Many Jihadists also start families in Syria and Iraq, either marrying local women, militants' widows, or female followers of the radical Islam from their countries, who like the men, but not so frequently, also leave for the conflict zone⁶⁹ (for example the daughter of Asu Dudurkayev, head of the Chechnya's migration office, who left with her *fiancé* to Syria against her father's will⁷⁰). According to the Salafists' interpretation of sharia,

⁶⁸ Khalimov's statement after joining IS, available at: <https://sendvid.com/priqxge4>

⁶⁹ The phenomenon must take place on a large scale - for example the Jihadists from the former USSR states are establishing schools teaching in Russian in the areas seized by them (including in Islamic State's capital - the Syrian city of Raqqa).

⁷⁰ After death of her husband Seda Dudurkaeva became the wife of Omar al-Shishani. <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/10/27/the-secret-life-of-an-isis-warlord.html>

the militants also can acquire sex slaves (including non-Muslims) – women imprisoned during the fighting⁷¹.

The case of Pankisi

One region where the mass departures for Syria are caused mainly by the social problems is the Pankisi Gorge in Georgia, inhabited by about six to eight thousand Chechens (Kists). The key to understanding why such a large proportion of Pankisi's population have participated in the jihad (100–200 people), aside from the ideological issues, is the difficult economic situation (a large unemployment rate, the lack of employment outside the undeveloped agriculture sector), the frustration of young people caused by it, as well as a severe generation clash (between the Salafi youth and the older generations). As in the other regions, the departures would not be possible without the prior development of Salafism in Pankisi. It first appeared in the region along with a mass influx of the refugees and Chechen militants looking for refuge from the Russian forces during the second Chechen war (after 1999). Under their influence, the dynamic process of re-Chechenisation and Islamisation of the secularised and Georgianised Kists began (since the beginning of the 19th century, Kists made up a small community in Georgia isolated from Chechnya; Islam did not play an important role there). This process was especially visible among the younger generation. It was Syria which became the main destination of jihad for Pankisi's inhabitants, which was in part caused by the actions of the Russian side (sealing the Russian-Georgian border by increasing the amount of border posts, planting land mines along the mountain passes etc.), which made it virtually impossible for the Kists to participate in the jihad in the Northern Caucasus. Abandoning the Northern Caucasian jihad also contributed to weakening the Islamic militancy there and a stabilisation of the situation in Chechnya during Ramzan Kadyrov's dictatorship.

7. War as a way of life

For a certain category of those departing to Syria and Iraq it is a continuation of their previous militant activities. It is true mainly in the case of the “professional” Chechen militants, for whom war has become a way of life. The choice

⁷¹ The issue is discussed (and justified) at length in Islamic State's online journal – *Dabiq* (issue IX), available at: <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2015/05/the-islamic-state-e2809cd-c481biq-magazine-9e280b3.pdf>.

of Syria and Iraq was not dictated by the ideological reasons – they would probably leave to any other part of the Islamic world where a similar conflict is taking place. Those with such motivation, however, seem to be a minority⁷².

⁷² Not only Jihadists fighting in Syria are the “products” of the Chechen wars. Individuals shaped by the war, whose life paths were slightly different, also end up in Donbas, where they fight on both the Ukrainian side (the so-called “Dzokhar Dudayev Battalion” established by the famous commander Isa Munayev, currently led by Adam Usmayev, and the Sheikh Mansour Battalion comprised of Salafists) and the Russian side (Chechens, often former militants, serving in the units subordinate to Chechnya’s president Ramzan Kadyrov).

III. PROFILE OF THE POST-SOVIET MILITANTS IN SYRIA AND IRAQ

1. Size and ethnic composition

It is highly difficult, due to obvious reasons, to provide an exact number of militants from the former USSR states currently fighting in Syria and Iraq. While both official and unofficial estimates are often provided (either by some of the governments, or by the post-Soviet, Western and Middle Eastern journalists and analysts), there are certain doubts regarding their credibility. Such estimates are also difficult to verify. A compilation of the available data allows for an estimation of the number of the militants from the entire post-Soviet area at around 4,000. This breaks down into individual countries as following:

- Tajikistan – officially 300 people⁷³, unofficially higher⁷⁴;
- Kyrgyzstan – officially 200⁷⁵, probably more than that (both ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks)⁷⁶;
- Uzbekistan – no official data, unofficial estimates vary significantly, the following data is presented: 50 people in the Jabhat al-Nusra group⁷⁷, two battalions⁷⁸, 500⁷⁹ or even 3,000 people⁸⁰;
- Turkmenistan – no official data, unofficially up to 360 people⁸¹, probably less than that;

⁷³ Statement by Akram Amonov, deputy head of the Tajik intelligence services (GKNB): <http://news.tj/ru/news/gknb-v-sirii-voyuyut-primerno-300-grazhdan-tadzhikistana>

⁷⁴ For example the case of the Chorqishloq village – <http://www.rferl.org/content/tajikistan-village-suspected-jihadists-syria-iraq/26616794.html>

⁷⁵ Statement by Rakhat Suleymanov, spokesman of the Kyrgyz intelligence services (GKNB): <http://kyrtag.kg/news/boleev-200-grazhdan-kyrgyzstana-nakhodyatsya-v-zone-boevykh-deystviy-v-sirii-gknb/>

⁷⁶ http://www.vb.kg/doc/288117_s_nachala_2014_goda_vyjavili_28_vyehavshih_v_siriu_kyrgyzstancev.html

⁷⁷ http://rus.azattyk.org/content/kyrgyzstan_siryia_central_asia_juhad/25150081.html

⁷⁸ http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=42674&no_cache=1

⁷⁹ http://ca-snj.blogspot.com/2014/03/blog-post_2701.html

⁸⁰ <http://www.uznews.net/ru/politics/26288-uzbekov-zovut-na-dzhihad-i-k-modzhahedam-v-siriju>

⁸¹ <http://www.rferl.org/content/turkmenistan-achilles-heel-central-asian-security/25265841.html>

- Kazakhstan – officially: over 300 people⁸², unofficially probably more, including many militants who depart with their families⁸³ (for example fragmentary data about 40 people only from the towns of Jezkazgan and Satbayev⁸⁴);
- Russia – officially 1,700 people⁸⁵, unofficially much higher (over 2,000), mainly Chechens (up to 1,000 people⁸⁶, including Chechen refugees residing in Europe who remain Russian citizens), Dagestanis (officially 200⁸⁷, unofficially probably about 500 to 1,000) and Ingush (50-70⁸⁸), as well as individual cases from the other regions (the remaining republics of the Northern Caucasus, Tatarstan, Bashkortostan);
- Azerbaijan – no official data, police statistics from various districts add up to 107 people⁸⁹, according to unofficial data from 100⁹⁰ to 250⁹¹;
- Georgia – no official data, unofficially from 50⁹² to 200 people⁹³;
- Crimea – no official data, unofficially from around a dozen⁹⁴ to 400 people⁹⁵; probably around 100 people⁹⁶.

⁸² Statement by Nurtay Abykayev, head of the Kazakh intelligence services (KNB): <http://knb.kz/ru/archive/article.htm?id=10376986@egNews>

⁸³ For example propaganda film about 150 Kazakh jihadists: <http://www.alalam.ir/news/1526261>

⁸⁴ <http://rus.azattyq.org/content/kazakhs-syria-youtube/25143647.html>

⁸⁵ Statement by Alexander Bortnikov, head of FSB: <http://www.rferl.org/content/islamic-state-russian-nationals-syria-iraq/26869105.html>

⁸⁶ [http://www.jamestown.org/regions/middleeast/single/?tx_ttnews\[pointer\]=2&tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=41861&tx_ttnews\[backPid\]=49&cHash=1a9cd3c6400175a9b81a8268cea71818#.VGO4omNnCZE](http://www.jamestown.org/regions/middleeast/single/?tx_ttnews[pointer]=2&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=41861&tx_ttnews[backPid]=49&cHash=1a9cd3c6400175a9b81a8268cea71818#.VGO4omNnCZE); <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/chechen-isis-fighters-under-omar-alshishani-threaten-to-take-fight-to-putin-9787809.html>

⁸⁷ Statement by Andrey Konin, head of FSB in Dagestan; <http://newsland.com/news/detail/id/1206831/>

⁸⁸ <http://slonus2012.livejournal.com/129359.html>

⁸⁹ <http://www.zerkalo.az/2014/zaderzhanyi-eshhe-dva-modzhaheda-vernuvshihsiya-iz-sirii/>

⁹⁰ <http://www.contact.az/docs/2013/Politics/102900055545ru.htm>

⁹¹ <http://contact.az/docs/2014/Want%20to%20Say/011100065006ru.htm>

⁹² Kakheti Information Centre – <http://www.civil.ge/rus/article.php?id=26473>

⁹³ http://www.bbc.co.uk/russian/international/2013/11/131120_chechens_syria_georgia

⁹⁴ <http://eaworldview.com/2014/02/syria-testimonials-russian-speaking-jihadis-crimean-tatar-suicide-bomber/>

⁹⁵ http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=41136&cHash=d873c9e97210acb9b505cdadb5ffd5b8

⁹⁶ <http://online.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702303795904579431290464167718>

In total the number of volunteers from all of the post-Soviet states oscillates at around four to five thousand people.

While the estimates are usually inaccurate and often reflect not so much the number of militants currently fighting in Syria and Iraq, but rather the number of people who were in the Jihadist' ranks at some point from 2011, they still make it possible to evaluate the scale of the phenomenon. If one juxtaposes the number of militants with the overall Muslim population in particular states and regions, it would lead to the conclusion that it is a marginal problem, especially with regard to Central Asian countries and Azerbaijan. Usually, not more than 0.005% of the Muslim inhabitants of particular states participate in jihad, which is equal to 50-60 people per million Muslims (similar to Kosovo - 57 people per million). It places the region's states behind many countries of Western Europe, the Middle East and the Maghreb, where these indicators are higher (for example in Denmark it is about 400 people per million, in Norway 350, the United Kingdom 214, France 200, Tunisia 272, Saudi Arabia 83, and Jordan 223), but still ahead of countries such as Turkey (13) or Indonesia (0.5)⁹⁷.

Country/Region	Militants	Departures per million of Muslim population
Former USSR	4,000-5,000	50-62
United Kingdom	600	214
France	1,200	200
Germany	600	140
Tunisia	3,000	272
Saudi Arabia	2,500	83
Jordan	1,500	223
Turkey	1,000	13

⁹⁷ Based on authors' own calculations and: <http://edition.cnn.com/interactive/2014/09/syria-foreign-jihadis/>, <http://www.rferl.org/content/infographics/infographics/26584940.html> as well as http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/17/world/europe/europe-arrests-terrorism-links.html?_r=0

The situation is completely different in the case of Chechnya, Dagestan and the Pankisi Gorge in Georgia, where the numbers are significantly higher. When it comes the entire, two million strong, Chechen population (the Caucasus, Russia, Europe, the Middle East), around 0.05%, or about 250-500 people per million participate in jihad. The numbers are even higher when it comes to Chechens residing in the Pankisi – about 1.25% or hypothetically 12,500 per million. It is the highest indicator amongst all Muslim communities worldwide. Also the participation of Dagestanis is significant (about 0.01% and 160 people per million).

Juxtaposition of the number of militants from the Post-Soviet states with number of those from other countries puts the region in the middle (if the former USSR is treated as a whole) or at the bottom of the list (each state separately). For comparison, the number of militants from Tunisia is estimated at above 3,000, and 2,500 from Saudi Arabia, 1,500 from Jordan, 1,000 from Turkey, 900 from Lebanon, 1,200 from France, 600 from Libya, 600 from the United Kingdom, 440 from Belgium, 250 from Austria and Holland, and 600 from Germany⁹⁸. Here again the fighters from the Northern Caucasus stand out, with their numbers at 1,500, making them almost a third of all the post-Soviet militants in Syria and Iraq.

If, however, the Post-Soviet area is treated as a whole, it ranks only behind the Middle East and Maghreb (around 6,000 people each), equal to Western Europe (about 3,000-4,000). Looking at the estimates of the overall number of the foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq (about 15,000-20,000⁹⁹), it can be stated that the militants from the former USSR, who constitute up to 15-20% of them, are over-represented, compared with the share of post-Soviet Muslims in the overall number of people professing Islam globally (around 80 million from 1.5 billion Muslims, 5-6%). Only a comparison of this kind allows for an evaluation of the real scale of the phenomenon described: the post-Soviet Jihadists are clearly over-represented amongst the foreign militants fighting in Syria and Iraq. This, however, does not change the fact that the phenomenon of leaving for Syria is still, compared to the overall Muslim population, a marginal one in all the countries of the region. An exception to that are Chechens (regardless of

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/09/cia-triples-number-islamic-state-fighters-201491232912623733.html>; <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/08/islamic-state-50000-fighters-syria-2014819184258421392.html>; <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/30/foreign-jihadist-iraq-syria-unprecedented-un-isis>

their place of residence) and, on a smaller scale, Dagestanis, whose departures for Syria can be described as an important social phenomenon.

In the ethnic dimension, the post-Soviet volunteers fighting in Syria and Iraq constitute a diverse mosaic, reflecting the ethnic diversity of the former USSR. Amongst them are members of ethnicities present in the Caucasus (Chechens, Ingush, ethnic minorities from Dagestan, Azerbaijanis), Central Asia (Uzbeks, Kyrgyz, Kazakhs, Turkmen), as well as those from the other largely Muslim ethnicities, who are present on a smaller scale (Crimean and Kazan Tatars, Bashkirs and others). Despite the fact that on the post-Soviet area the ethnic factor traditionally plays an important political role, it is of little significance in regard to relations between the militants in the Middle East. Many units present there, were however *de facto* formed along ethnic lines, but this was mostly due to practical reasons (natural formation basing on kinsmen, ease of communication and contacts with the home country, and. in the case of some Chechens - a brotherhood of arms formed during the wars in Caucasus). Furthermore, there are no units hermetically created basing only on the members of one particular ethnic group: in most of them not only militants from the various ethnicities of the post-Soviet area fight side by side, but also those from the other Muslim states, as well as from Syria and Iraq.

2. Main groups and leaders

The post-Soviet volunteers fighting in Syria and Iraq are members of both large organisations (such as Jabhat al-Nusra or Islamic State) and of several militant groups of their own, which are interconnected and most often sponsored by the larger ones.

During the first period of the civil war in Syria most of the militants fought in the ranks of the local groups and factions, first of all Jabhat al-Nusra (Syrian Al-Qaeda affiliate). It was caused by the fact, that during the initial period, the post-Soviet militants were recruited mainly from the Caucasian diaspora in Syria, meaning that most of them having some command of Arabic so they could serve in the Arab-speaking units. With the influx of volunteers from Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia, none of whom speak Arabic, there is on the one hand the need to organise militants into language-based operational units (which enabled effective communication inside the unit), on the other one they have gained sufficient size and importance to establish their own groups. Such groups were created not so much on an ideological or ethnic basis, but rather due to their leaders' ambitions and aspirations. They are not

fully independent sovereign – they usually have sponsors – most often either al-Nusra or Islamic State. Their form and affiliations are not permanent – rifts and personal conflicts between their leaders occur on a regular basis.

The most important groups, in which the post-Soviet militants are present, include:

- **Islamic State (formerly ISIS).** It has over a thousand volunteers from the former Soviet Union in its ranks. The most important militant group inside IS is the thousand strong Katibat al-Aqsa, led by the Georgian Chechen Omar Shishani (real name – Tarkhan Batirashvili). Two smaller militant groups are also most probably under Batirashvili’s command – Yarmuk Battalion led by Akhmed Shishani (Akhmed Chatayev)¹⁰⁰, and Mujahidin Battalion headed by Khattab Shishani (real name unknown)¹⁰¹. All of these groups are fighting in northern and north-eastern Syria. Formally they are part of IS, and not only volunteers from the Caucasus are present in their ranks (though they are still a majority), but also from Central Asia (mainly Kazakhstan)¹⁰² and other Muslim states. The post-Soviet contingent appeared in IS in November 2013, when Omar Shishani, along with a substantial part of his followers, transferred from the Army of Emigrants and Supporters (JMA) to Islamic State, while several months later he also swore allegiance to the caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Omar Shishani’s group is the strongest post-Soviet militant group, both in terms of the number of militants as well as its military capabilities. Its strength is partly based on the prestige associated with belonging to the victorious Islamic State, the availability of equipment and supplies provided by IS¹⁰³, its charismatic and well-known leader Omar Shishani, and effective propaganda. This latter activity is undertaken in multiple dimensions, both towards the potential recruits, as well as against the ideological and political adversaries (for ex-

¹⁰⁰ Akhmed Chatayev is a native of Chechnya, but for an extended period of time he lived in the Pankisi Gorge. He was involved in the Lopota Gorge incident in 2012 in Georgia (skirmishes between Chechen militants and Georgian security forces, the causes of which are still unexplained). Subsequently he was arrested by the Georgian authorities, but acquitted in court in Tbilisi in January 2013, after which he probably left for Austria, and from there to Syria; <http://www.rferl.org/content/russia-lopota-gorge-incident-islamic-state-syria/26869379.html>

¹⁰¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tbdcidmum30>

¹⁰² <http://www.rferl.org/content/islamic-state-kazakhstan-child-militants-video/26752339.html> and https://archive.org/details/HMC_race

¹⁰³ Providing supplies for the militants and their families, rather than directly financing them. More in chapter 4.3 Other areas of operations.

ample against the Caucasus Emirate, which is regarded as its competition). The propaganda materials are professionally manufactured – Shishani’s group is aided by Islamic State’s propaganda department – the Al Hayat Media Centre¹⁰⁴. The group’s main propagandist is Abu Jihad Shishani, while the main medium is the www.fisyria.com website¹⁰⁵.

– **Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar (JMA; Army of Migrants and Helpers).**

This group includes up to a thousand militants from the Caucasus, Central Asia, and Western Europe and the Balkans. As with Islamic State it was included by the United States on its list of terrorist organisations. JMA is linked with the Jabhat al-Nusra organisation, and it simultaneously upholds the authority of the Caucasus Emirate (many militants are formally bound by oath of allegiance to the emir of the Caucasus), but does not have any influence on its operations. JMA is in conflict with Omar Shishani’s group, however it does not engage overtly in combating Islamic State. The group was formed in March 2013 as a result of the merger of Omar Shishani’s group formed a year earlier – Katibat al-Muhajireen (Migrant’s Brigade) and two smaller groups: Jaish Muhammad and Katib Khattab. Following Omar Shishani’s departure for IS in November 2013, Salahuddin Shishani (Feyzullah Margoshvili) became the group’s leader¹⁰⁶. Currently the organisation is led by Abu Ibrahim Khorasani, and his deputy is Omar Dagestani. Starting from July 2014, JMA along with three other groups¹⁰⁷ forms Jabhat Ansar al-Din (Supporters of Religion Front) – an alliance of independent groups distancing themselves from the conflict between the al-Nusra (despite being affiliated with it) and IS¹⁰⁸. The main combat operations’ area

¹⁰⁴ IS propaganda unit, which is engaged in the production and distribution of propaganda materials in several languages (including Arabic, English, French and Russian). Similar units exist in most of Islamic terrorist organisations worldwide, but the audio-visual materials produced by IS are produced with unprecedented professional craftsmanship. Materials portraying the post-Soviet militants are usually voiced in Russian, which facilitates reaching out to the post-Soviet audience. For example: http://videos.videopress.com/UwXee3Hs/the-islamic-state-22uncovering-an-enemy-within22_dvd.mp4

¹⁰⁵ Real name Islam Atabiyev. Further in textbox *Propagators of Jihad* in Chapter 4.1 Recruitment and arrival.

¹⁰⁶ <http://eaworldview.com/2013/12/syria-salahuddin-shishani-new-leader-jaish-al-muhajireen-wal-ansar-enmity-isis/>

¹⁰⁷ Except for JMA the members of alliance include: Harakat Fajr ash-Sham al-Islamiya (independent Syrian organisation from Aleppo), Harakat Sham al-Islam (comprised mainly of Jihadists from Morocco) and al Katiba al-Khadra, small group of Saudi veterans of wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, which in October of 2014 merged into JMA. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rWN8XfpGJZ8>

¹⁰⁸ <http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=22253>

of JMA is Aleppo and its surroundings (the group controls several villages, where it constitutes authority). JMA is also actively engaged in propaganda efforts: it has a website of its own¹⁰⁹, a propaganda film centre (Akhbar Sham – The Strength of the Levant), and is active on social media, which facilitates reaching out to new recruits. An oft recurring theme of JMA’s propaganda is its lack of participation in the internecine fight between the Jihadist organisations and its allegiance to the Caucasus Emirate (for example JMA uses IK’s flag)¹¹⁰.

- **Junud al-Sham (Soldiers of the Levant)** – an independent group established in 2012, aligned with Jabhat al-Nusra and JMA. Its main areas of operations include the Aleppo and Latakia governorates, where it participates in fighting¹¹¹. Junud al-Sham’s Emir is Muslim Abu Walid Shishani (Murad Margoshvili) – a veteran of both Chechen wars and a native of the Pankisi Gorge. The group is actively engaged in propaganda efforts – criticising other organisations for their internecine infighting and displaying its leader, who remains very popular in the Caucasus and amongst the Chechen refugees in Europe¹¹². In its ranks, Junud al-Sham hosts mainly Jihadis from the Caucasus, but includes volunteers from other states, and even a small number of Syrians are present¹¹³. The organisation also possesses its own training infrastructure¹¹⁴.
- **“Tarkhan’s Group”** – a small group of several dozen militants aligned with the previous two organisations and led by Tarkhan Gaziyeu – until recently one of most prominent figures of the Chechen militancy. Most likely the group was created by Chechen militants loyal to Gaziyeu, who left Chechnya for Syria in 2013¹¹⁵. The group takes part in fighting in Latakia and in the proximity of Aleppo¹¹⁶. It is not active in the propaganda dimension.

¹⁰⁹ <http://www.akhbarsham.info/>

¹¹⁰ For example: https://ia802604.us.archive.org/5/items/RazjasnenieAmiraDmaSalahuddinaShishaniVSvjaziSPoezdskojVGorodRakka/jma_emir_explanation_raqqa_visit_2014.mp4

¹¹¹ http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/03/chechen_al_qaeda_com.php

¹¹² Junud ash-Sham’s Twitter page: <https://twitter.com/junuds> and https://twitter.com/junuds_ru

¹¹³ <http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=22563#more-22563>

¹¹⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ue2Jn7LkmUo>

¹¹⁵ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pt93qBr_DeU and <http://www.adamalla.com/show-thread.php?t=9443&page=7>

¹¹⁶ <http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=21901#more-21901>

- **Jamaat Khalifat (Caliphate Community)** – a small Chechen group (80-90 people)¹¹⁷ under the command of Abdul Hakim Shishani (real name unknown), who fought in Chechnya until 2008 when he at first left abroad for medical treatment, and then departed to Syria¹¹⁸. Jamaat Khalifat operates in the Latakia governorate. Initially it was part of the Ansar al-Sham group¹¹⁹, while currently it is most probably part of the Jamaat Ahadun Ahad coalition (Group of the One and Single)¹²⁰.
- **Ansar al-Sham (Helpers of the Levant)** – a Syrian militant group formed in 2012 in Latakia by a local entrepreneur and a veteran of the war in Afghanistan – Abu Omar al-Jamila. The supreme commander of the group’s militant wing is a Chechen – Abu Musa Shishani (real name unknown)¹²¹. The group may number as many as two and a half thousand militants¹²², most of whom are Syrians. It is engaged in combat operations in the Latakia and Idlib governorates¹²³. Despite only a small fraction of Ansar al-Sham’s militants being post-Soviet, the group has a website in Russian¹²⁴ and is active in social media¹²⁵. The group is part of the Jabhat al-Islamiya (Islamic Front) alliance established in November 2013.
- **Jamaat Sabri** – a small group (between one and two hundred people) established in 2012 by an Uzbek – Abdullah al-Tashkenti. Following Abdullah’s death in the beginning of 2014 (during an attempt to storm Aleppo prison)¹²⁶ the organisation has been headed by Emir Khalid (real name unknown). Jamaat Sabri has participated in fighting in Aleppo and its environs alongside al-Nusra and JMA, has developed training infrastructure of its own¹²⁷ and engaged in propaganda efforts¹²⁸. In March 2014 the group, through its

¹¹⁷ <http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=22664#more-22664>

¹¹⁸ <http://kavkazzone.com/testkit/index.php?tab1=hashtag&query=%Do%A8%Do%Bo%Do%BC%Do%B5&lang=turkish>

¹¹⁹ <http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=22950>

¹²⁰ <http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=22380#more-22380>

¹²¹ <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=55066>

¹²² <http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=21582>

¹²³ <http://iswsyria.blogspot.com/2014/04/rebels-reopen-latakia-front.html>

¹²⁴ <http://khilafa.org/>

¹²⁵ https://twitter.com/khilafa_org

¹²⁶ <http://eaworldview.com/2014/02/syria-brief-guide-chechen-north-caucasian-factions-syria/>

¹²⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t7ZfpBDouDU>

¹²⁸ Jamaat Sabri’s profile on the YouTube website: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCiC-whvLt9b-Dn5r7SINv-bA>

contacts with Omar Shishani and Abu Jihad Shishani, joined IS, retaining its independence within the organisation¹²⁹. Jamaat Sabri is predominantly an Uzbek group, but its members are also militants from other Central Asian states (mainly Tajikistan), Dagestan, the Arab countries (mainly Lebanon's Sunnis) as well as a small number of volunteers from Western Europe.

- **Jamaat Imam Bukhari (Imam Bukhari's Community)** - an Uzbek group with up to several hundred members, active in Aleppo and its environs, probably aligned with Jabhat al-Nusra¹³⁰. It is almost exclusively made up of Uzbeks, while the group's backbone consists of former militants of the Central Asian organisations fighting in Pakistan and Afghanistan (the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and the Islamic Jihad Union). Its leader is an Uzbek, Sheikh Salahuddin (real name unknown), a veteran of clashes in Afghanistan and Pakistan. According to Salahuddin, Jamaat is bound by oath to the leader of the Afghan Taliban - Mullah Omar - and was established in accordance with him¹³¹; this seems unlikely (the group was probably established based on IMU and IJU militants who, due to worsening conditions in Pakistan's Waziristan, left these organisations and joined the more prospective jihad in Syria¹³²). Jamaat Imam Bukhari is active in the recruitment and training of volunteers from Central Asia (mainly Uzbeks from Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan), possesses a training infrastructure of its own in the Aleppo governorate, and actively engages in multiple propaganda ventures (the group has a website in Uzbek¹³³ and is active on social media¹³⁴).

The civil war in Syria and the participation of militants from former USSR states in it resulted in the appearance of many charismatic and well known leaders amongst them (as had taken place earlier in Chechnya, for example in the case of Shamil Basayev or Ruslan Gelayev). They serve not only as political or military leaders, but also play an important propaganda role, being magnets

¹²⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m-01LOFCiAc>

¹³⁰ <http://www.rferl.org/content/islamic-state-uzbek-militant-faction-syria-taliban/26686992.html>

¹³¹ http://albuxoriy.com/Video_v6929.html

¹³² Members of these organisations, who remained in Pakistan and Afghanistan, spoke of a group of militants who left to fight in Syria due to poor financial/living conditions present in Waziristan. <http://sodiqlar.info/rus/index.php?newsid=1790>

¹³³ <http://albuxoriy.com/>

¹³⁴ On Twitter website: <https://twitter.com/albuxoriycom>, as well as on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCE2mx4rmfqoSRueioRkBzWA>

for attracting new volunteers. Furthermore, the case of Arab volunteers fighting in Afghanistan in the 1980s shows that, such individuals can constitute a threat long after the conflict they initially took part in ended¹³⁵. The most important leaders of the post-Soviet militants in Syria and Iraq include:

- **Omar Shishani (Tarkhan Batirashvili)** – born in 1986 in Birkiani village in Georgia’s Pankisi Gorge into a mixed family (his father is Georgian, and his mother a Kist). While Ruslan Gelayev’s militants were in the gorge (1999-2002) he was in contact with them¹³⁶. In 2006 he was drafted into the Georgian army, later on becoming a career soldier. He served in a reconnaissance unit and took part in the Georgian-Russian war in 2008. After the war he was dismissed from the army due to tuberculosis and in 2010 he was arrested for the illegal possession of firearms¹³⁷. It was probably while serving a prison sentence that he became a radical Salafist. Following parole in 2011 he left for Turkey and then to Syria, where he created the Katiibat al-Muhajireen group. After establishment of the Army of Migrants and Helpers (JMA) he became its leader¹³⁸. In 2013 along with a substantial part of militants subordinated to him, Batirashvili left to ISIS, which resulted in a split in JMA¹³⁹. While in ISIS and IS he became the organisation’s chief military leader in Syria and was in charge of its forces, for example during the fight for Kobane¹⁴⁰.
- **Salahuddin Shishani (Feyzullah Margoshvili)** – native of Pankisi Gorge in Georgia. He took part in the jihad in the Northern Caucasus in the ranks of the Caucasus Emirate¹⁴¹. After migrating to Syria he joined the Army of Migrants and Helpers. He opposed its integration into ISIS. Until June 2015 he was the emir of JMA¹⁴². For unknown reasons he was ousted from power and imprisoned by his militants.

¹³⁵ First of all Al-Qaeda which was established by some of them, but also participation of the Algerian veterans of Afghanistan in the war in Bosnia.

¹³⁶ <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/249731/>

¹³⁷ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-28217590>

¹³⁸ <http://chechen.org/archives/1845>

¹³⁹ <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702303309504579181962177007316>

¹⁴⁰ <http://www.rferl.org/content/georgian-killed-fighting-with-islamic-state/26731657.html>

¹⁴¹ <http://syriadirect.org/main/36-interviews/1733-chechen-militants-more-prestigious-to-fight-for-islamic-state>

¹⁴² <http://www.akhbarsham.info/2014/01/16/11/>

- **Abdul Karim Krymskiy (real name unknown)** – until June of 2015 deputy emir (naib) of Jaish al-Muhajireen wal Ansar, currently also imprisoned. He is a Crimean Tatar, and one of the few non-Chechen commanders amongst the leaders of the organisations which include Jihadists from the former USSR states¹⁴³.
- **Muslim Abu Walid Shishani (Murad Margoshvili)** – born in 1972 in Pankisi Gorge. He served in the Soviet Army in an air defence unit stationed in Mongolia. He took part in both of the Chechen wars¹⁴⁴. During the first war he fought in the unit of the Saudi Jihadist Khattab. During the second Chechen war he was a local commander. He was arrested in 2003 but was acquitted by Supreme Court of Ingushetia under unclear circumstances 2006¹⁴⁵. After his release Margoshvili left for Pankisi from where he tried to re-join the jihad in the Northern Caucasus but without success. In 2012 he left for Syria, where he established the Junud ash-Sham group¹⁴⁶.
- **Tarkhan Gaziyeu** – born in 1965 in Chechnya. He is a veteran of the both Chechen wars. During the second war he was appointed the commander of the south-western front, and in 2007 also the head of the security service of the Caucasus Emirate. In 2010 Gaziyeu, along with other IK commanders, renounced his oath towards Eemir of IK Dokku Umarov¹⁴⁷. In 2013 he left for Syria, most probably along with his unit, and formed a militant group of his own¹⁴⁸.

3. Role in the ecosystem of jihad

The civil war in Syria ongoing since 2011 has created a complex environment of mutual links, animosities and tactical alliances between the groups and organisations participating in it. The system of correlations, which can be described as a peculiar ecosystem of jihad, is dynamic and opaque – its shape is affected both by factors relatively easy to verify (for example the military situation or open rivalry between particular groups) and by an array of settings which are difficult to examine, such as the personal conflicts between leaders,

¹⁴³ <http://www.akhbarsham.info/2014/03/02/15/>

¹⁴⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iPBGvWkSibw>

¹⁴⁵ <http://politkovskaya.novayagazeta.ru/pub/2006/2006-16.shtml>

¹⁴⁶ <http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=22051>

¹⁴⁷ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pt93qBr_DeU

¹⁴⁸ <http://jihadology.net/2014/06/04/the-clear-banner-the-clash-over-real-jihad-in-syria-isis-vs-the-caucasus-emirate/>

covert alliances, outside influence or local animosities. At the same time, it is possible to determine and describe certain general mechanisms taking place during interactions between the above mentioned groups, including the militants from the post-Soviet states.

First of all, any smaller group fighting in Syria and Iraq (all post-Soviet Jihadist groups can be regarded as such) must find a market niche of their own in the ecosystem of jihad. This process consists of several elements, such as: choosing a patron from among the larger organisations, adjusting the group's possibilities to meet the needs of the latter, and, finally, proving the group's usefulness. Only two organisations can currently play the role of patron (i.e. they possess adequate resources, including financial, control a large enough territory and enjoy minimal support from outside actors); these are the rivalling Jabhat al-Nusra and Islamic State. The potentials of these organisations are not equal – Islamic State is a much more powerful player, therefore it can provide much better conditions for volunteers and smaller groups without limiting their subjectivity. The patron-subcontractor relations are mutually beneficial – the patron organisations strengthen themselves by gaining new units comprised of foreign volunteers and receive aid in the recruitment and training of militants, while smaller groups receive material (infrastructural and financial) support and a certain legitimisation of their activities (for example an assigned area of responsibility). In reality it means that larger groups govern the actions of the smaller ones, aligning themselves with them. In some cases this results in the patrons taking almost total control over them. For smaller groups this cooperation creates the risk of them losing their identity, but it is the only possible option enabling further activity (mainly due to financial factors)¹⁴⁹.

All groups of post-Soviet Jihadists in Syria have patrons – either Islamic State or Jabhat al-Nusra. Within Islamic State there are both: a large group of militants from the former USSR which nominally does not have distinct structures, yet enjoys significant freedom of actions¹⁵⁰, and several groups functioning under their own name (for example Azerbaijani Jamaat¹⁵¹, Jamaat Sabri¹⁵², Jamaat

¹⁴⁹ However, it is obviously not limited to these factors – the rivalry between large groups also results in smaller radical Islamic groups fighting in Syria and Iraq becoming polarised, hence the need to align with one side.

¹⁵⁰ First of all the group led by Omar Shishani.

¹⁵¹ Small group established by Azerbaijani Jihadists, operating within IS, but having an emir of its own (Emir Mohammad): <http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=21872>

¹⁵² Small Uzbek group. In March of 2014 it joined ISIS: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m-01LOFCiAc>

Yarmuk). Despite Omar Shishani being IS's military commander for northern Syria, and the post-Soviet militants being more active than the rest, they do not have much influence on how Islamic State's policy is formed, and none of their leaders (including Omar Shishani) are present in IS's shura (council)¹⁵³. The groups aligned with Jabhat al-Nusra, operating mainly in north-western Syria (Aleppo, Latakia and Idlib governorates), are more independent and distinct from their patron. The largest of these groups is the Army of Emigrants and Supporters and Junud al-Sham.

Both the groups operating under the patronage of IS and those under al-Nusra are active in recruiting new volunteers, propaganda efforts, and combat actions in the areas chosen by patron organisation, and – in some cases – the management of territory controlled in Syria (more in chapter IV).

The second important mechanism, present in almost all groups regardless of their actual importance and strength, is that they undertake actions aimed at stressing their individuality and independence in relation to the other militant groups and patron organisations. This is especially visible in the information and propaganda dimensions. These actions are caused first of all by the need to secure the group's position inside the local power balance, which in return translates to the influx of volunteers, financing, the share in the spoils of war etc. Besides propaganda, it also shows itself in the rivalry between particular groups and leaders, in occurrences of their insubordination and when they exaggerate their strength and achievements (for example when one group/leader claims success in a battle when several groups took part in it).

Thirdly, a characteristic feature of jihad in Syria (to a much lesser extent than in Iraq) is the constant rivalry, tensions, and often even clashes between various militant groups, caused by ideological, theological and political disputes (for example the issue of the validity of Islamic State's proclamation of the Caliphate), as well as personal conflicts, fighting over spheres of influence etc. Examples of these conflicts include tensions between Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra, as well as between the latter and the Free Syrian Army. Post-Soviet militants, who are either spread across various factions or form groups of their own, naturally participate in the above tensions (especially militants from Caucasus). This also leads to conflicts between them (for example between Omar Shishani's group within Islamic State and the Jaish Ansar

¹⁵³ http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Research/Files/Reports/2014/11/profiling%20islamic%20state%20lister/en_whos_who.pdf

wal Muhajireen, which recognises the authority of the emir of the Caucasus). Despite grave differences and fierce disputes in the informational sphere (for example between Islamic State's militants from the Caucasus and the groups remaining in the Caucasus Emirate), conflicts between the post-Soviet units take place on a limited scale. There are no reports of fratricidal infighting or ethnic tensions between the militants from the various post-Soviet ethnicities, who in their home countries are often in conflict with each other (for example between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz, or Chechens and Dagestanis), or between the post-Soviet volunteers and the militants from other regions. The feeling of community is dominant, as well as the feeling of being in a group (within particular organisations) and Jihadi solidarity (fighting the "infidel"), as well as a more widely, peculiarly defined Muslim unity, which is based on the internationalist ideology of the global jihad.

Furthermore, despite being divided and engaged in rivalry between their patron groups, the Jihadists from the former USSR states constitute an informal community, the basis of which is the similar cultural code, mentality, the system of mutually-comprehensible Soviet-based references, and also the Russian language – which just as in the case of Salafists in the former USSR area, serves as a lingua franca and is the language of jihad. It is not only the language of communication in Syria and Iraq (the majority of the post-Soviet volunteers have no proficiency in Arabic), but also the language of propaganda and recruitment, allowing for contact with the countries of origin. Almost all of the websites and profiles in the social media are in Russian. Other languages, such as Chechen, Uzbek, Azeri or Tajik, are utilised to a much lesser extent, mainly to reinforce the propaganda's message when the target audience is a specific ethnic group in the country of origin.

The informal community of post-Soviet Jihadists is at times used by their patron organisations as a channel of communication. One example of this is the failed negotiation attempts between Islamic State and al-Nusra (November of 2014), the aim of which was to end the conflict between these organisations¹⁵⁴. During the talks both sides were represented by Chechens: JMA's emir, Salahuiddin Shishani (for Jabhat al-Nusra) and Omar Shishani (for Islamic State)¹⁵⁵. It shows both the level of hostility between al-Nusra and Islamic State (the lack

¹⁵⁴ <http://www.beladusham.com/o798.html>

¹⁵⁵ https://ia802604.us.archive.org/5/items/RazjasnenieAmiraDmaSalahuddinaShishaniVS-vjaziSPoezdkojVGorodRakka/jma_emir_explanation_raqqa_visit_2014.mp4

of direct negotiations, the need to employ Chechens as intermediaries), and the large amount of trust they have for post-Soviet Jihadists.

Despite the internationalist character of the jihad in Syria, Chechens stand out from the rest of the volunteers from the former USSR states. This is true with regard to both their self-perception (the sense of uniqueness), as well as how they are perceived by the other militants. They are perceived (and this is in line with how they view themselves) as the vanguard of not only the post-Soviet militants, but the entire jihadist milieu. Reasons for the high esteem in which the Chechens are held are not based on their ideological or intellectual superiority (amongst Chechens, including those in the Middle East, the Caucasus and Europe, there are no widely acclaimed or popular religious authorities) but rather the perception of them as being exceptionally experienced, battle-hardened, brave and ruthless. This perception of Chechens in the Islamic world is a result of the Chechen wars, which were followed by Muslims worldwide leading to the rise of Chechens' authority. It is also of great importance that many Chechens are present among the Jihadist group's leaders in Syria. They often direct successful attacks (mainly in Aleppo and its proximity). The "Chechen brand" is so popular and carries such positive connotations, that many militants from the Caucasus, without being ethnic Chechens, use the "Shishani" (Chechen) pseudonym in order to increase their authority amongst other militants (for example Omar Shishani himself (whose father is Georgian) or his aide – Abu Jihad Shishani, who is an ethnic Karachay¹⁵⁶).

¹⁵⁶ <https://chechensinsyria.wordpress.com/2014/02/18/syria-umar-shishanis-right-hand-man-slams-jabhat-al-nusra-treachery/> and <http://kavkazpress.ru/archives/67349>

IV. METHODS OF OPERATION OF THE POST-SOVIET MILITANTS IN SYRIA AND IRAQ

1. Recruitment and arrival

Migrants from the former USSR states have been joining the jihad in Syria since the first months of the civil war there (which began in the spring of 2011, after two months of brutally suppressed protests of the Syrian opposition, which were part of the Arab Spring). The first volunteers were members of the Northern Caucasian diaspora in Syria (mainly Chechens and Dagestanis), which prior to the conflict counted several thousand people¹⁵⁷. It was comprised mainly of students, who were either studying Arabic or Islamic theological studies in the Syrian universities, or those who after graduating from university, decided to stay in Syria, usually due to ideological reasons (Salafists, who did not plan on returning to their countries of origin)¹⁵⁸. Many of these people also arranged for their wives-to-be to travel to Syria from their home countries, and started families there.

The next group of recruits were post-Soviet Muslims resident in neighbouring countries, such as Turkey, Jordan and Egypt. Most often they were students (for example Rustam Gelayev, who was a student in Egypt and son of well-known Chechen commander Ruslan Gelayev; Rustam was killed during fighting in Aleppo in August 2012), Chechen migrants living in the Middle East states (for example Ruslan Machalikashvili aka Emir Sayfullah, who arrived to Syria from Turkey, then became leader of one of the Caucasian groups in northern Syria and was killed during the storming of Aleppo prison in February 2014), and migrant workers in Turkey (mainly Central Asians). Later on also members of the Chechen diaspora in Europe started arriving in Syria. They were mainly refugees, who first began appearing in Europe in the 1990s, and there were many former militants among them, who had decided to leave Chechnya – either due to the lack of possibilities to continue the fight, or due to fearing possible repressions¹⁵⁹.

¹⁵⁷ Not including the old diaspora, a hundred thousand strong and to a large extent assimilated (about 100,000 Circassians, 7,000 Dagestanis and 4,000 thousand Chechens) – the descendants of the so-called Caucasian Muhajirs, which settled in the territory of the then Ottoman Empire at the turn of 19th and 20th centuries after the Caucasian War and the quelling several highlander rebellions by Russia.

¹⁵⁸ Similar diasporas exist also in Egypt, Kuwait, Qatar and Saudi Arabia – the biggest one amongst them is in Egypt.

¹⁵⁹ The Chechen diaspora in Europe is about 100,000 strong, amongst which most reside in France (about 30,000), Austria (25,000), Belgium (17,000), Poland (10,000), Norway (10,000) and Denmark (1,000).

Only at the turn of 2012 and 2013 did the influx of volunteers from the post-Soviet area (Central Asian states, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Crimea and Russia, above all the Northern Caucasus) begin on a larger scale. A substantial amount of the volunteers were labour migrants, mainly from Central Asia, working in the Russian Federation. They were mainly people motivated by religious reasons (not necessarily members of the Salafi communities) who, under the influence of on-line propaganda decided to leave.

Almost all volunteers from the post-Soviet states arrive in Syria via Turkey. This is caused both by the ease of getting across the Turkish-Syrian border which, despite the conflict, remains open, and also by the ease of getting from the countries of origin to Turkey itself. Ankara has a very liberal visa policy (from among the former USSR states, only citizens of Armenia must obtain a visa to enter the territory of Turkey), and to cross its borders only a valid passport is required. Travelling through Turkey is also facilitated by it being an important transport hub between Europe and the Middle East, as well as between the former USSR area and the Middle East, which millions of people pass through annually, an amount which makes it impossible to control them. Additionally, the Turkish authorities do not cause obstructions for individuals travelling to jihad in Syria, or those returning from there: militants quite freely cross the Syrian-Turkish border, albeit without their weapons, travelling to Turkey in order to replenish supplies, transport recruits to Syria, rest, for business or private reasons (meetings with family, travelling to home countries). Furthermore, on several occasions Turkey has been accused of actually aiding volunteers bound for Syria to fight the Damascus regime.

Travelling to Syria via Turkey is also facilitated by the communication network that developed between this country and the post-Soviet area. There are direct flights to Turkey from all the countries of the region, while the connections include not only those with the capitals of Southern Caucasus or Central Asian states, but even with cities such as Grozny, Makhachkala, Mineralnye Vody etc. Additionally, from Georgia and Azerbaijan there is a land route to Turkey (including numerous bus connections).

The basic tool for recruitment is Internet propaganda, including delivered through the social media websites (Facebook¹⁶⁰, Twitter¹⁶¹, Vkontakte¹⁶²) and

¹⁶⁰ <https://www.facebook.com/jihad.sham.muaskar>

¹⁶¹ https://twitter.com/junuds_ru

¹⁶² <http://vk.com/syriaru>

YouTube¹⁶³. Militants, individuals responsible for propaganda in particular groups (for example Islam Atabiyev aka Abu Jihad Shishani in Islamic State), as well as jihad's supporters (who may reside either in the conflict zone, Turkey, Europe, or even the post-Soviet states) upload various materials there (photographs, articles, films) which are intended to persuade Muslims to make the decision to leave. Due to the poor knowledge of Arabic prevalent among post-Soviet Muslims (including Salafists), propaganda materials published in Russian are of key importance (for example on the www.fisyria.com website), which are produced chiefly by the post-Soviet militants themselves. What attracts many recruits is the fact that leaders of many groups active in Syria and Iraq are migrants from the post-Soviet states, mostly Chechens. The activity of well-known, radical preachers from the post-Soviet area (most of whom currently reside outside the former USSR) also increases the popularity of the notion of jihad. They either openly call for Muslims to join the war their sermons or they hint at it. Amongst them the most important ones include Dagestan's Omar Sasitlinsky (Asrapil Ahmednabayev) and Nadir Abu Khalid, Tatarstan born Salman Bulgarsky (Ayrat Vakhitov) or Chechen Abu Yusuf Shishani (real name unknown).

Propagators of Jihad

Abu Jihad Shishani (real name Islam Atabiyev, born in 1983) – native of Karachay-Cherkessia; between 2003 and 2006 he studied at the al-Azhar University in Cairo; upon returning he became involved in the local structures of the Caucasus Emirate (the so-called Vilayat of Kabarda, Balkaria and Karachay); arrested in 2009 and sentenced to a year in prison; after being released in 2011 he left for Syria, where he aligned with Omar Shishani; Abu Jihad at first fought in the ranks of the Army of Emigrants and Supporters, afterwards together with Omar Shishani he joined ISIS; currently he is the unofficial spokesperson of the Caucasian militants within the Islamic State, and is responsible for propaganda released in Russian¹⁶⁴; he is the author of numerous video messages, in which he calls for post-Soviet Muslims to join the jihad in the Middle East and criticises the Caucasus Emirate¹⁶⁵ (he was probably a co-organiser of the schism which took place in the Emirate in late 2014).

¹⁶³ <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCE2mx4rmfqoSRueioRkBzwA>

¹⁶⁴ M.in. poprzez portal www.fisyria.com

¹⁶⁵ <http://fisyria.info/2014/12/09/Собаки-лают-караван-идет/>

Abu Omar Sasitlinsky (real name Israpil Ahmednabayev, born in 1980) – is a native of Novosasily, a village close to Dagestan’s Khasavyurt. He studied at Islamic universities in Syria and Egypt. During the second half of the 2000s he returned to Dagestan, where he became the leader of a Salafist community in Novosasily and one of the most active and popular Salafi preachers in the republic. He built a madrassa in his home village and established an Islamic non-governmental organisation engaged in fundraising and other activities.

Due to his authority and knowledge of sharia, thousands of people sought his council and opinion, as well as his help for example in solving family conflicts. His views are extremely radical: he calls for a *de facto* non-recognition of secular authorities. He does not, though support armed struggle in the Caucasus. After the civil war in Syria began, he started raising funds for humanitarian aid for Syrian refugees, and visited Turkey and Syria several times. He delivered fervent anti-Shia sermons about Syria, which led to an increased level of interest about the situation in this country amongst the public in Dagestan and, as a consequence, to volunteers departing¹⁶⁶. In 2014 due to fear of arrest he left for Istanbul, where he became one of the leaders of Caucasus diaspora, continuing his preaching and charity work.

Nadir Abu Khalid (real name Nadir Medetov) – born in 1984 in Makhachkala (Dagestan); he received his education in an Islamic institute in Kabardino-Balkaria, then he attended sharia studies in Egypt and Saudi Arabia; after finishing his studies he returned to Dagestan, where he engaged in preaching (delivered sermons in one of the Salafi mosques in Makhachkala, recorded his statements and uploaded them to the Internet); his sermons were very popular among young people in Dagestan, and gained increasing popularity in the entire former USSR; in October of 2014 he was arrested and accused of the illegal possession of firearms (which were probably planted on him by the security forces); several days later the court put him under house arrest; in May 2015 under unclear circumstances Medetov appeared in Syria; he swore an oath to the leader of Islamic State and called for his supporters to migrate to IS.

Salman Bulgarsky (real name Ayrat Vakhitov; born in 1980) – is a native of Naberezhnye Chelny, a town in Tatarstan where a Salafi community exists;

¹⁶⁶ Akhmednabiyev’s sermons can be found on his private profile on VKontakte social network http://vk.com/abuumar_sasitlinski

between 1999 and 2001 he fought in Afghanistan on the side of the Taliban; he was arrested there by US forces and between 2002 and 2003 was imprisoned in Guantanamo Bay; after returning to Tatarstan he became a Salafi leader in Naberezhnye Chelny and a known Salafi preacher across Russia; during the second half of the 2000s due to fear of arrest (he was accused of organising terrorist attacks in Tatarstan) he left for Afghanistan, and in 2011 for Syria, where he is engaged in online jihad propaganda¹⁶⁷.

Lone emissaries, who recruit volunteers directly, are probably operating in the post-Soviet states. However the oft-seen media information about the existence of an organised recruitment networks or cells belonging to a particular group (for example the Islamic State) on the post-Soviet area does not seem likely. In times of universal access to the Internet, which not only enables the call for jihad to be delivered to the post-Soviet Muslims masses, but also to directly communicate with potential recruits, such actions would be redundant and carry unnecessary risk. It is simply easier to recruit remotely, without incurring additional costs or the risk of being arrested, having local recruitment structures dismantled by the security services etc. (the situation does however appear to be different in Western Europe where, due to the democratic character of the states and the need for the security services to abide by legal regulations, the emissaries can operate more easily¹⁶⁸). In the Northern Caucasus an additional obstruction to this activity is the hostility of the Caucasus Emirate's structures to departures to Syria and Iraq. Numerous accounts of militants in Syria suggest that the most common procedure is instructing new volunteers on logistic issues remotely. Only after travelling to Turkey by themselves are the volunteers joined by the emissaries of the particular groups, who help them cross the Turkish-Syrian border.

2. Combat

Armed combat is the most fundamental form of operation of the post-Soviet Jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq, as well as the main goal of militants arriving there. All of the above mentioned groups take an active part in combat against the Syrian government forces or the Kurdish forces hostile to Jihadists

¹⁶⁷ For example <https://twitter.com/salmanbulgar>

¹⁶⁸ One example of an emissary recruiting a volunteer is the case of the Chechen imam from the Austrian city of Graz who, prior to his arrest in June of 2014, recruited future Jihadists from the local Chechen diaspora: <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2014/06/05/Austria-arrests-suspect-for-Syrian-war-recruitment.html>

(especially against Islamic State). Post-Soviet militants have participated in numerous skirmishes in Syria and several operations in Iraq. The battles in which they were fought took place mainly in northern Syria, with the largest ones including the fights in Aleppo, the siege and assault of the Menagh air base and attempts to capture Kobane. The participation of particular groups in battle is dependent on their patron and the territory which the latter controls; for example JMA takes part mainly in the urban warfare in Aleppo and its environs, while Islamic State units loyal to Omar Shishani are stationed above all in north-eastern Syria (they took part, among others, in the assault on Kobane), rarely fighting against government forces and Kurdish militants (peshmerga) in Iraq (yet they did participate in seizing Mosul in June 2014)¹⁶⁹. Post-Soviet militants (excluding those at the initial period of war) are not present however in the battlefields of southern Syria (Quneitra, Daraa or Suwayda governorates), where some of the most intense battles of the Syrian civil war took place. The reasons for this include both logistical aspects (the difficulty of travelling from the border with Turkey in northern Syria to the southern frontline) and political/military ones – the larger role of the non-radical Syrian opposition groups there (above all the Free Syrian Army – supplied and aided by the West via Jordan)¹⁷⁰.

Post-Soviet Jihadists use similar methods and tactics to other radical Islamic militant groups in their combat actions. A distinctive trait is their diversity of methods: Post-Soviet militants take place in symmetrical regular combat, guerrilla or other asymmetric operations, and engage in terrorist activity.

The first category includes the participation of Omar Shishani's group in ISIS's spectacular successes in 2014¹⁷¹ and JMA's (and other smaller groups' aligned with Jabhat al-Nusra) operations in Aleppo. These encompass both manoeuvre warfare operations, utilising motorised, mobile units advancing without its rear support units (ISIS's successes or Junud al-Sham seizing Kessab town during the so-called al-Anfal offensive in March 2014¹⁷²), as well as

¹⁶⁹ <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/ginger-jihadist-mosul-omar-al-shishani-chechen-general-1452232>; It seems to show Islamic State's reluctance to use foreign fighters in Iraq, where it is supported by the local, radicalised Sunni forces <http://www.understandingwar.org/report/islamic-state-counter-strategy-counter-state>

¹⁷⁰ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-22285555>

¹⁷¹ More on ISIS's successes in: Krzysztof Strachota, The crisis in Iraq and the twists and turns of Turkish Middle East policy, *OSW Commentary*, 30.07.2014, <http://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2014-07-30/crisis-iraq-and-twists-and-turns-turkish-middle-east-policy>

¹⁷² Executed by Jabhat al-Nusra in Latakia.

position warfare in urban settings (for example JMA's and Jamaat Sabri's attempts to seize the prison in Aleppo¹⁷³). Similar to other groups, the militants from the former USSR states prior to carrying out an operation conduct a pre-operational assessment and planning, resembling one which is employed by regular armies – it uses intelligence from on the ground reconnaissance, as well as digital technologies, which until recently were not available to terrorist organisations, for example good quality satellite imagery, available from online satellite maps.

The groups with volunteers from the post-Soviet countries also use guerrilla, asymmetrical and terrorist tactics on a wide scale. Undoubtedly the organisations fighting in Syria and Iraq carry out attacks aimed at the civilian population, yet most of their attacks which make use of terrorist tactics (for example suicide bombings) are conducted against military targets. One widespread asymmetric/terrorist tactic (depending on the nature of the target) is the assault of fortified enemy positions – military outposts or government institutions – with suicide bombers used as battering rams¹⁷⁴. The aim of such actions is not only to achieve an immediate military objective (securing a location, the liquidation of enemy fortified positions etc.), but also to exert negative psychological pressure on the enemy (lowering his morale and breaking the will to fight by showing one's determination and ruthlessness). One example of such actions conducted by the post-Soviet militants can be the assault (preceded by a year-long siege) on the Syrian air base in Menagh near Aleppo, which began with the destruction of the base's gate by explosives-filled truck driven by a JMA suicide bomber¹⁷⁵.

The post-Soviet Jihadists are also engaged in actions aimed at maintaining control over seized territory. This at times includes the limited administration of such an area (discussed further in the next chapter) and carrying out punitive operations against real or perceived enemies. Many of these actions take the form of war crimes, for example mass executions of prisoners of war (Syrian and Iraqi soldiers, or members of the Kurdish armed groups), conducted mainly by Islamic State, but also by the forces aligned with al-Nusra (Chechens have

¹⁷³ <http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=22428>

¹⁷⁴ Examples of this include: the attack on Aleppo prison in September of 2014, or Islamic State's attack on the Syrian base in Deir ez-Zor in the eastern part of the country. <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/09/09/world/meast/uk-syria-suicide-bomber/> and <http://english.alkhbar.com/node/22775>

¹⁷⁵ <http://www.rferl.org/content/umar-shishani-military-prowess-islamic-state/26677545.html>

participated in IS mass executions of prisoners of war¹⁷⁶). Counterintelligence operations are also carried out, with their objective being both exposing the Assad regime's spies amongst the civilian population on seized territory (for example JMA's actions in Aleppo – the arrest and execution of alleged agents of the Damascus authorities)¹⁷⁷ and preventing the infiltration of their own ranks by intelligence services agents of the countries of origin (for example the arrest and killing of two Russian spies in Omar Shishani's group¹⁷⁸).

Conducting combat training and securing supplies and weapons are important elements of the armed groups' activities. Military training is the domain of the militants who previously fought in the Caucasus¹⁷⁹, or in Afghanistan and Pakistan¹⁸⁰. The core of the post-Soviet militant groups is comprised of veterans either of the clandestine militancy (for example Tarkhan Gaziyeu, who for years was commander of one of the Caucasus Emirate's sectors in Chechnya) or the armed forces of the countries of origin (for example Omar Shishani)¹⁸¹, who train new recruits using methods resembling those in regular armies. All volunteers prior to joining the combat units must undergo month-long basic training, followed by specialised training lasting up to several months¹⁸². During the training recruits are indoctrinated, but the emphasis is typically placed on military training (from drills and physical exercises, through expertise in using various types of weapons, to live-fire tactical training, the

¹⁷⁶ http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/03/isis_executes_civili.php

¹⁷⁷ <http://www.akhbarsham.info/2015/02/10/108/>

¹⁷⁸ Sergey Ashimov and Jambulat Mamayev, citizens of Russia and Kazakhstan respectively, who admitted to being recruited by the Russian intelligence services and performing a mission, the objective of which was to gather information about the post-Soviet volunteers fighting in Syria and Iraq, as well as their leaders (above all Omar Shishani). Both were shot by a teenage Kazakh boy – a student of an IS school for post-Soviet militants' children: http://videos.videopress.com/UwXee3Hs/the-islamic-state-22uncovering-an-enemy-within22_dvd.mp4

¹⁷⁹ For example the Chechen special unit under the command of Ruslan Gelayev during the first Chechen war.

¹⁸⁰ According to accounts of American special forces soldiers fighting in Northern Afghanistan, IMU militants trained in the movement's camps in Pakistan, due to their tactics and equipment were a much more dangerous enemy than the Taliban. Based on: <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/journal/docs-temp/386-feitt.pdf>

¹⁸¹ Above all volunteers from the Central Asian states (inhabitants of the Caucasus are rarely drafted to military service), who underwent compulsory military service in their countries – while obviously the level of military training in these countries is usually not very high, they still constitute an added value, in comparison to volunteers with no prior military experience.

¹⁸² Based on materials published by post-Soviet militants in Syria. For example: https://archive.org/details/HMC_race

aim of which is to develop coordination and cohesion within the future units). Low rank commanders do not receive additional training – they are usually recruited from among experienced militants who have proven their skills on the battlefield and who speak Arabic¹⁸³.

The weaponry used by the militants from the former USSR states is similar to that used by other groups. Their arsenal includes a wide range of Soviet (from Syrian army warehouses) and American made (left by the fleeing Iraqi army during Islamic State's offensive in 2014) small arms and light weapons, including portable anti-aircraft and anti-tank systems. The above mentioned groups also possess modern communication equipment, night vision goggles, bullet-proof vests, Kevlar helmets (war trophies from Iraq) and means of transportation – usually civilian SUVs and trucks armed with machine guns.

The post-Soviet militants fighting in Syria are additionally equipped with large firearms and light artillery (chiefly mortars). In this aspect Omar Shishani's group differs from other groups of the post-Soviet Jihadists – during some of the battles (for example the failed assault on Kobane) the first group had heavy military weaponry at its disposal, for example howitzers, armed personnel carriers or tanks (most often manned by Arab crews)¹⁸⁴. It is noteworthy that despite the presence of individuals with the required skills and experience to operate such weaponry among the post-Soviet militants, Islamic State did not transfer it to them on a permanent basis. This does not necessarily show a lack of trust towards the volunteers from the former USSR states, but rather the Iraqi character of the group – Islamic State is based above all on Iraqi Sunnis and it is they who make up the organisation's core¹⁸⁵.

3. Other areas of operation

Besides combat and activities related to it (recruitment and training), the post-Soviet militants' groups are active in several other dimensions, such as: securing financing, organising the rear infrastructure for the militants (some of which arrive in Syria with their families) or control over the seized territories. They are of no less importance for the functioning of the above groups, and

¹⁸³ Based on information present in short biographies and statements of members of the above-mentioned groups.

¹⁸⁴ Based on materials published by IS and groups linked to it taking part in the assault on Kobane.

¹⁸⁵ <http://www.understandingwar.org/report/islamic-state-counter-strategy-counter-state>

characterising them is necessary to understand the phenomenon of post-Soviet militants in Syria.

The most important and area of non-combat operations of the above mentioned groups and potentially the one with the most far-reaching consequences is organising rear infrastructure for the militants fighting in their ranks. It is important to remember that for a substantial part of the volunteers arriving in Syria, jihad is only one part of their motivation. The Hijra – the religiously motivated migration from countries where Muslims are being persecuted to territories where sharia is the law of the land – is equally important¹⁸⁶. That is the reason why volunteers migrate to Syria along with their families, viewing this country as a long term settlement. It is not a new phenomenon in the post-Soviet area – militants from the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and Islamic Jihad Union have stayed for so long (since 1999) in Afghanistan and Pakistan, that a new generation of Jihadists has been raised there¹⁸⁷. Currently a similar tendency may be observed amongst the post-Soviet volunteers fighting in Syria and Iraq, especially those linked to Islamic State. This means that the issue of organising the required rear infrastructure for the militants is important, and the terrorist organisations need to establish this infrastructure for new volunteers in order to attract them (or at least to persuade them of its existence).

Several aspects are involved in organising the rear for the militants: securing financing and the required infrastructure, for example housing (also for the families), as well as providing care for militants' families during their absence or death.

Financing for the post-Soviet militants' groups comes from several sources: directly from the patron organisation (especially in the case of IS), the spoils of war and the business activities of the group, which most often is linked to smuggling people and goods between Syria and Turkey (mainly in the case of smaller groups aligned with Jabhat al-Nusra). Financing the groups does not necessarily mean directly providing them with financial resources; it is rather done through material aid and by supplying the groups with the goods necessary for them to continue fighting and supporting militants and their families. This is true also in the case of Islamic State, which possesses the largest

¹⁸⁶ More in the next chapter.

¹⁸⁷ The adult children of IMU's militants took part in, for example, the attack on the Karachi airport in June of 2014: <http://tribune.com.pk/story/720324/uzbek-fighters-involved-in-karachi-airport-siege-militants/>

financial resources, in part due to seizing assets from the banks of Mosul after capturing the city (estimated from US\$ 425 million¹⁸⁸ to as much as US\$ 2 billion¹⁸⁹) and revenue generated by smuggling oil to Turkey¹⁹⁰.

Securing the necessary infrastructure for militants and their families is done in strict coordination with the patron organisations. It is more important in the case of groups fighting under the banner of Islamic State (which actively calls for all Muslims to migrate to the territories of the Caliphate)¹⁹¹ than in the case of smaller, independent organisations, whose members travel in Syria without their families (although there were lone cases of JMA militants arriving with their families¹⁹²). The migration of entire families is more common among volunteers from the Central Asian states (mainly Kazakhstan) and significantly rarer amongst those from the Caucasus¹⁹³. After arriving in Syria the volunteers are quartered in the town where the main base of the particular group is located. Men participate in training, women stay at home, and children attend schools run by the group, where they are taught Arabic, basic Islamic texts and undergo basic military training. The fact that a special Russian language madrasa for children of the militants from former USSR states¹⁹⁴ was established in the “capital” of Islamic State – Raqqa – shows the scale of such migrations. Militants’ families are sustained through the material aid provided by the armed group or patron organisation. In the case of a militant’s death, his family is still taken care of, but widows usually marry again quickly (marrying a widow, especially the wife of a fallen militant, is dictated by religious rites).

A new phenomenon amongst post-Soviet radical Islamic militant groups is the departures to Syria of lone women, who go there in order to marry militants. It is most widespread in the Caucasus and Kyrgyzstan. The migration takes place upon invitation from a previously acquainted (via social network websites) Jihadist, whom the woman plans to marry. Volunteers fighting in Syria and Iraq can marry or bring their wife-to-be from their countries of origin only

¹⁸⁸ <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2014/06/12/isis-just-stole-425-million-and-became-the-worlds-richest-terrorist-group/>

¹⁸⁹ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/16/terrifying-rise-of-isis-iraq-executions>

¹⁹⁰ <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/6c269c4e-5ace-11e4-b449-00144feab7de.html>

¹⁹¹ More in the next chapter and footnote 211.

¹⁹² <http://www.akhbarsham.info/2015/02/05/107/>

¹⁹³ Based on above mentioned organisations’ materials, for example: https://archive.org/details/HMC_race

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

after participating in combat for at least a year, or as a reward for significant achievements on the battlefield¹⁹⁵. The same is true in the case of sex slaves (especially in IS) – non-Muslim women who were taken captive. They are distributed amongst the militants as a reward for achievements, or simply sold.

Besides activities linked to securing a group's logistic needs, post-Soviet Jihadists are also engaged in basic administration on the territories they have seized in Syria (in Iraq IS usually relies on the existing local arrangements). These are not comprehensive measures and most often consist of controlling these areas, including using brutal methods (terrorising the population, executions etc.). At times in order to guarantee the population's obedience, the inhabitants are persuaded or forced to swear an oath of loyalty to group's leaders (this tactic is used by for example JMA in the proximity of Aleppo)¹⁹⁶. On an *ad hoc* basis, Jihadists from the former USSR also distribute humanitarian aid. The example of Iraq, where Islamic State has been operating longer than in Syria, shows that groups willing to maintain local administration prefer to make use of the existing local arrangements and personnel (securing control over them and enforcing their loyalty), rather than using foreign militants for this purpose¹⁹⁷.

¹⁹⁵ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-30573385>

¹⁹⁶ Based on: <http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=21230> and <http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=22368>

¹⁹⁷ In the seized territories in Iraq, IS allows some of the Iraqi administration to continue functioning – local, apolitical institutions, especially those dealing with strategic infrastructure, such as waterworks, electric power plants etc. For more about ISIS's, and later IS's, administration of the territories seized in Iraq in 2014 see: http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Defeating%20ISIS_o.pdf

V. THE INFLUENCE OF WAR MIGRATION ON THE POST-SOVIET AREA - JIHAD IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND THREATS FOR THE REGION

The subject of the mass departures of post-Soviet Muslims to Syria and Iraq is often brought up in statements of government representatives (mainly Russian and Central Asian) as well as in the local media. The issue is also being raised on the forum of regional organisations, especially those active in the security dimension (for example the Collective Security Treaty Organisation – the CSTO or Shanghai Cooperation Organisation – SCO). The tone of the statements is almost always alarmist and comes down to underlining the alleged risks associated with the hypothetical return of the militants. A frequently recurring theme is the civil war in Syria and Iraq, as well as the establishment of Islamic State – all as a result of mistakes America’s Middle East policy, or even as an effect of Washington’s deliberate actions aimed at destabilisation (IS as an “American project”) ¹⁹⁸. The hysteria which began in the Russian media after militants seized the government military base in the Syrian town of Tabqa can serve as example that illustrates the use of the issue of Islamic State as a scare factor; they uploaded a video in which Islamic militants presented the seized Russian weaponry (delivered by Moscow to Bashar al-Assad’s regime), spoke in Arabic and threatened Vladimir Putin with “the liberation of Chechnya and the entire Caucasus”¹⁹⁹. In the Russian media this unremarkable private statement made by an Arab militant was being presented as Islamic State’s “official” warning to the Russian Federation. A similar tone was used while spreading the information about an alleged attack on Russia by “thousands of militants”, which was supposedly voiced by Omar Shishani in conversation with his father, who lives in the Pankisi Gorge²⁰⁰.

Analysing the phenomenon of post-Soviet Jihadists’ war migration and the situation in the countries of origin leads, however, to diametrically different conclusions. Paradoxically, the described phenomenon not only fails to constitute a threat to security in the post-Soviet area, it even stabilises the situation in

¹⁹⁸ The popular news programme *Vesti Nedeli* broadcast by the Russian state television *Rossiya* channel is one example of this narrative, for example the 19th of October 2014 programme, available at: <http://vesti7.ru/archive/index?edate=19.10.2014#21181>. See also: http://www.ng.ru/cis/2014-10-21/1_asia.html

¹⁹⁹ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mZc3etLP-38>

²⁰⁰ <http://www.aif.ru/society/safety/1357241>; <http://www.km.ru/world/2014/10/09/islamist-skie-ekstremisty-i-terroristy/749443-polevoi-komandir-igil-prigrozil-rossii>

the countries of origin. The main short term effect of the conflict in the Middle East is the exodus of the most radical Muslims (and in the case of the Northern Caucasus – also active militants). War migration from the former USSR states, especially from those where Salafism and radical Islam are strongest, is therefore playing the role of a security valve – and is *de facto* beneficial for the authorities and the official Muslim clergy apparatus collaborating with them. While in the long term perspective, participation in jihad can strengthen some milieus ideologically, its immediate effect is to weaken Salafist communities, whose power and popularity, especially amongst young people, is growing, and who are viewed by official Islam as their main ideological rivals. Jihadists' propaganda also serves as an unexpected ally of the authorities – as their aim is not only to recruit volunteers for fighting, but also call for all Muslims to resettle along with their families to the territory of Islamic State.

The at least neutral relation of the authorities of many of the region's states towards volunteers departing for Syria can be seen in the concentration of the security services on individuals returning from Turkey and the Middle East, with little attention focused on those departing to this area (those departing, as opposed to those arriving, are much less often and much less thoroughly controlled and interrogated when crossing the border). It is not rare for the law enforcement services to intervene only after appeals from a volunteer's family, which desperately seeks methods to prevent them from departing²⁰¹. Individuals returning from jihad or suspected of participation in the war in the Middle East face harsh consequences (frequent cases of arrests and trials, often resulting in prison sentences²⁰²), despite the fact that the legislation of some of the states does not treat participation in armed conflict abroad as a crime (for example in Russia in order to convict an individual for taking part in jihad, it is necessary to prove that he acted against the interests of the Russian Federation²⁰³). There is also no information regarding the intelligence services of the post-Soviet states attempting to neutralise the alleged threats stemming from Jihadists, for example through the liquidation of the leaders of armed groups or those responsible for recruitment and logistics on Turkish territory. Meanwhile similar measures, aimed for example against opposition activists in Central Asian states or

²⁰¹ <http://izvestiya.az/nov/9650>

²⁰² <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/250956/>; <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/236388/>; <http://www.doshdu.ru/novosti/v-rossii-osuzhden-uchastnik-siriiskoi-voiny>

²⁰³ Article 208 of the Russian Federation penal code: participation in an armed group on a territory of a foreign state, illegal from the legal viewpoint of that state, conducted against the interests of Russian Federation.

Chechen separatist leaders, have been used multiple times in the past (for example the assassination of the Chechen leader Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev in 2004 in Qatar by Russian agents, or of Tajik opposition figure Umarali Quvvatov in Istanbul in March 2015). This obviously does not exclude the fact that the intelligence agencies of the post-Soviet states (first of all Russia) are most probably attempting to infiltrate the groups comprised of volunteers from the former USSR, similarly as is the case with the clandestine militancy in the Caucasus. Factors which facilitate Russia to do so include continuing diplomatic presence in Syria and support from the Syrian regime, as well as the possibility to use the network of agents active for years amongst the militants in the Caucasus.

Another stabilising effect of the jihad in Syria is the fact that Salafists – and more widely Muslim – communities have shifted their focus from the situation around Islam in their country or region towards the Middle East. While the interest in the conflict does lead to a radicalisation of views, the consequences of it do not usually involve undertaking armed/terrorist actions domestically, but rather migration to Syria. This stems from the radicals' pragmatism and an accurate diagnosis of the situation in their countries, where in the next several years the chances of jihad starting, not to mention it succeeding, are minute. Many of them also refrain from armed or terrorist activity on the territory of their states paradoxically due to religious reasons (the lack of a mandate or even an explicit ban on launching jihad in particular circumstances, according to a majority of Muslim scholars).

It is symptomatic that alongside deepening instability in Syria and Iraq, there was no rise of threats associated with radical Islam (terrorist attacks, armed protests etc.) and in the case of the Northern Caucasus, a stabilisation took place (when compared to previous years). The Caucasus remains the most unstable region of the former USSR, however the intensity and frequency of clashes in the region has tangibly decreased. One of the main reasons for this is Islamic radicals' perception of the jihad in the Middle East as being a priority, while the one in the Caucasus not. In combination with no chances for military success, brutal repressions conducted by the federal forces and Chechnya's president Ramzan Kadyrov, as well as an improvement of the economic situation in Chechnya, it led to an exodus of militants to Syria and a rerouting of the stream of recruits from the Caucasus and Europe (from among the Chechen refugees) there²⁰⁴.

²⁰⁴ More in: Maciej Falkowski, *op. cit.*

The most often stated main proof of the destabilising influence of the jihad in Syria is the prospect of the possible return of the militants to launch militancy or terrorist attacks²⁰⁵. Through this lens, Syria is a training camp for the volunteers, whose actual goal is to initiate jihad in their countries of origin, using their training, experience and contacts with the terrorist international. Some sources even claim, that an unwritten agreement between Islamic State and the Caucasus Emirate exists, which is the basis for the exchange of militants (in reality these two organisations are in severe conflict), and that IS is to commission emissaries to various post-Soviet countries and establish cells there²⁰⁶.

The special services of some of the post-Soviet states (for example Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan) try to prove that the threat from Islamic State is real, for example by releasing information on the arrests of returning militants or foiled attacks (usually on the eve of summits of post-Soviet heads of state or important international visits). Russian and Central Asian media also publish texts about IS militants' plans to wage jihad in Central Asia and the alleged concentration of these militants in Afghanistan near the border with Turkmenistan and Tajikistan. This information can hardly be called credible, rather the goal of disseminating it is to create an atmosphere of threat from militant Islam and to show one's – alleged – effectiveness in combating terrorism²⁰⁷. Probably the incidents widely discussed in the media concerned with flying the IS flag – in Tashkent (on one of the bridges in the city centre in September 2014) or during the opposition rally in Baku (12th of October 2014) – were also provocations by the special services, aimed at discrediting opponents or finding an excuse to detain them²⁰⁸.

In reality, the perspective of militants fighting in Syria and Iraq returning en masse to the former USSR states is not likely, while the character of the departures and the foreseeable progression of the situation in the Middle East

²⁰⁵ For example: <http://www.aif.ru/politics/world/1357947>, <http://www.fergananews.com/articles/8283> and <http://www.rg.ru/2014/09/26/sovbez-site.html>

²⁰⁶ <http://www.pravda.ru/news/world/formerussr/other/06-10-2014/1229832-igil-o/and> and http://inosmi.ru/almadapaper_net/20140912/222959767.html

²⁰⁷ The information disseminated by the Ministry of Interior of Tajikistan on the eve of head of FSB Nikolai Patrushev's visit to Dushanbe (October 2014) was particularly improbable, i.e. that thirteen people, who were planning to carry out terrorist attacks (for example to destroy tunnels along the Dushanbe – Khojent road) and then to depart for jihad in Syria, have been detained: <http://rus.ozodi.mobi/a/26644567.html>

²⁰⁸ <http://www.rferl.org/content/uzbekistan-islamic-state-flag-tajikistan-syria-iraq/26565807.html>; <http://www.rferl.org/content/azerbaijan-islamic-state-extremism-demonstration-isis/26635106.html>

as well as in the post-Soviet countries themselves, all suggest that departures for Syria should be viewed as a true migration. That does not exclude isolated returns (which are already taking place), but individuals who decide to do so are disillusioned by jihad or underwent a mental breakdown. It can hardly be expected that such individuals constitute a security threat.

One of the reasons for that large scale return is unlikely is the very high fatality rate amongst the militants, in whose ranks young, inexperienced people dominate²⁰⁹. For most of the volunteers departure for jihad is a one way ticket, as they do realise that due to the consequences they could face (legal trial, probable prison sentence, repressions by the authorities), the perspective of returning to a normal life is unlikely. The stories of militants who decided to return prove that – the consequences from the authorities were severe, and this is especially the case in Russia, Azerbaijan and the Central Asian states. While many of the region’s states are weak, corrupt and challenged by a whole array of internal problems, their security apparatuses, which are based on Soviet experiences, function effectively when it comes to surveillance of society and monitoring the transfer of people and, in the case of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, exerting full control over an individual (for example through a system of denunciation or exit visas in place there). In this situation, the probability of an unnoticed return and attempt to live a peaceful life is extremely low.

The fact that entire families leave for the Middle East also shows the migratory character of the travels to Syria²¹⁰. Many militants take their wives with them, or get candidates for wives from their countries of origin to join them. This is caused by the theological explanation of the “Hijra” (propagated by Islamic State and accepted by many Salafi communities to be in line with the Koran and Sunnah), i.e. the necessity to emigrate from territories governed by infidels, where it is impossible to live according to sharia, to a land where Islamic law is in force²¹¹. According to this interpretation, some of the emigrants are guided not so much by the duty to participate in jihad, but rather by the commandment to perform Hijra. In this case, it is hard to count on them returning.

²⁰⁹ The case of Azerbaijan.

²¹⁰ <http://kavkazpress.ru/archives/21687>; <http://news.nur.kz/286765.html>

²¹¹ For example the English language propaganda magazine of the Islamic State – *Dabiq* – the 3rd edition was dedicated to this matter: *Dabiq. A call to Hijra*, August 2014, <https://pl.scribd.com/doc/239137271/Dabiq-Call-to-Hijrah>

The motive which militants most often quoted when returning to their countries of origin is their intention to spread the jihad to the territory of the former USSR (mainly the Caucasus and Central Asia), to stir uprisings and to conduct terrorist attacks. This scenario, while being resonant in the media, is unlikely to materialise. It is on the one hand aimed at realising political goals (combating the opposition, consolidating power in face of a threat etc.), and on the other, it is a result of overestimating the threat stemming from Islamic fundamentalism and militant Islam for the post-Soviet area²¹². In reality jihad in the region lacks wider perspectives: the states are sufficiently strong, motivated, and are sufficiently competent to deal with the threat of militant Islam and they are prepared to use brutal methods in doing so. Nor is the necessary social base present (Jihadist slogans are supported by a marginal part of the society, even in the Northern Caucasus). So far also the predictions of Islamic revolutions in the Fergana Valley, Tajikistan and Dagestan, forecast since the 1990s, have not materialised.

The scenario of return would be theoretically possible in the case of a serious destabilisation of the situation in one of the post-Soviet states. In the short and medium term perspective, however, an internal crisis causing existential threats (civil war, the collapse of the state structures, internal chaos) still seems less likely than the conservation of the current situation (even in Uzbekistan or Tajikistan), and it is only in such conditions that militant Islam would be capable of attempting to achieve its goals. During the last quarter century which has passed since the fall of the USSR, the post-Soviet states (unless their disintegration was in Russia's interest) have proven their durability. The gloomy forecast did not materialise even in the case of the weakest states – Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, which can be described as “failing states”, and whose transformation into “failed” ones was predicted on numerous occasions²¹³.

Opening a new “front” in the Caucasus or Central Asia by Islamic State also does not seem likely (nor can the pledges of allegiance to the caliph by some of

²¹² More in: Krzysztof Strachota, Maciej Falkowski, Jihad vs. The New Great Game. Paradoxes of militant Islamic threats in Central Asia, *OSW Point of View*, January 2010, <http://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/policy-briefs/2010-01-27/jihad-vs-new-great-game-paradoxes-militant-islamic-threats>

²¹³ For example: Tajikistan: On the Road to Failure?, International Crisis Group, Asia Report No. 162 (12th of February 2009); http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/asia/central-asia/tajikistan/162_tajikistan___on_the_road_to_failure.ashx; and Johan Engvall Flirting with State Failure. Power and Politics in Kyrgyzstan since Independence, Central Asia – Caucasus Institute, July 2011.

the armed groups' leaders in Dagestan and Chechnya be interpreted in these categories; more in the next chapter). Despite the present military, state building and propaganda achievements (the increase in popularity in the Islamic world), it is not a foregone conclusion that Islamic State will remain in its current form (control over a large territory and administration of it). Furthermore, even if Islamic State morphs into a lasting geopolitical element of the Middle East, it is hard to imagine a scenario, in which it would be in the Caliphate's interest to launch a jihad in the post-Soviet area. This would mean a direct confrontation with Russia, which is not desirable for Jihadists. Despite its support for the Assad regime, Moscow is not a strategic adversary of Islamic State, whose main enemies include Shias (including Iran), the Middle Eastern regimes (the Saudis in Saudi Arabia, the Hashemites in Jordan etc.) and in the later perspective also the West. Being concentrated on the Middle East, Islamic State regards the post-Soviet area as Islam's periphery, and views its utility only in supplying its own ranks with new recruits (including battle-hardened militants from the Caucasus). For this reason, it is more likely that the tensions (caused mainly by rivalry over recruits) between such organisations as the Caucasus Emirate or IJU and Islamic State will deepen, rather than these organisations will be directly subordinated to Islamic State.

Also from the Russian perspective Islamic State (and similar organisations) does not constitute a serious threat, furthermore they can generate strategic benefits for Moscow by: accumulating the most active Salafists from the post-Soviet area, diverting US attention from the post-Soviet area, and creating a possibility for the American forces to be strategically tethered to the Middle East. Spreading chaos in the Middle Eastern region may additionally cause a rise in the oil price on the global markets. For these reasons open conflict between Moscow and Raqqah seems improbable.

Over the next few years the situation in the Middle East will probably deteriorate further and the region will descend into wars and chaos. Therefore, the majority of the post-Soviet militants will probably stay in the Middle East permanently, turning in to professional Jihadists, who (just as veterans of the war against the Soviet forces in Afghanistan) will travel from one hotspot to another. A precedent from the post-Soviet area which illustrates this phenomenon well involves the militants of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, who at the end of the 1990s fled from Central Asia, migrating to Afghanistan and Pakistan, where they became part of the global jihad. While the prospect of their return to Central Asia is still brought up, so far it has failed to materialise, and it seems that it will be possible only when a serious crisis occurs in the region.

While the threats originating from the Jihadists fighting in the Middle East, and Islamic State itself, are minor, both of these factors will play a certain political role in the post-Soviet area. Similarly as in the case of the IMU, the above issues will be held up as a bogeyman by the region's authoritarian regimes in order to strengthen their authority, increase control over society, neutralise political opponents and combat the Islam which is independent from the government. They may also serve as a handy tool in Russian geopolitical powerplays for control of the post-Soviet area (as an explanation for the need for tighter security ties between particular states and Moscow in the face of the militant Islam threat). It is even more probable, since already certain Russian actions, statements from politicians and media propaganda fit into the above logic (for example raising the issue of alleged threats for Russia stemming from the Jihadists from the Pankisi Gorge in Georgia fighting in the Middle East)²¹⁴.

²¹⁴ One example of the use of the above issue in Russian propaganda is an article published in October of 2014 in *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, which suggested an array of threats to Russia from the Islamic State, which in turn was portrayed as being a *de facto* American project aimed at Russia: http://www.ng.ru/cis/2014-10-21/1_asia.html

VI. ACTUAL ISLAM-RELATED CHALLENGES IN THE POST-SOVIET AREA

Little evidence shows that the problem of post-Soviet Jihadists fighting in the Middle East will have a significant influence on the security and stability of the post-Soviet area. However Islam, including militant Islam, is an important factor influencing particular states and regions. The level and character of the influence and challenges that the region's states face differs depending on the geopolitical settings, the internal situation and the socio-religious specifics.

1. Northern Caucasus

The Northern Caucasus is the region where Islam plays the biggest socio-political role not merely on the scale of the Russian Federation, but also of the entire former USSR. The specifics of the Northern Caucasus include the dynamically growing Salafism (above all in Dagestan) and the fact that it is the only place in the post-Soviet area where Jihad is *de facto* underway. While militant Islam is the most visible current in Caucasian Islam, viewing the situation (including the religious one) in the region only through this lens, does not reflect the reality on the ground. In the religious sphere, as in the ethnic dimension, the Northern Caucasus is an extraordinarily diverse region – above all in terms of the internal Islamic subdivisions (very strong Sufism, peaceful Salafism, folk and official Islam, and cultural Islam in the western part of the region). It is noteworthy that currents other than Salafism and militant Islam generate problems of equal gravity, also in the security dimension (for example Dagestani Sufi brotherhoods have their own armed groups, which participate in local disputes and conflicts).

When analysing the situation in the Northern Caucasus it is important to consider the divide between its eastern and western parts. In the west (Adygea, Karachay-Cherkessia, Kabardino-Balkaria, Northern Ossetia) Islam is more diluted, and society is secularised and was subjected to Russification. In the heavily Islamised east (Dagestan, Ingushetia, Chechnya), Islam is one of the key elements of social and political life, and the sole socio-political, or even civilisational, concept alternative to the Russian state. Taking into consideration the level of Islam's presence in the public life, it is possible to claim that the Eastern Caucasus republics should be called Islamic ones. This is not reflected in their legislation, though.

The most important process, which has been underway at a varied pace in all of the region's republics after the fall of USSR, is the consequent re-Islamisation

of public life. Except for the cultural/ritual aspects (obeying the religious commandments and rituals is becoming increasingly common) and the institutional aspects (the establishment of new mosques, Islamic schools, universities and media), its important element is a progressing shariatization (a spontaneous diffusion of the Islamic law into the legal framework, except in Chechnya, where it was inspired by the authorities²¹⁵) and an increasingly strong presence of Islam in the politics (politicians accommodating or even appealing to religion, the role of official and informal leaders and religious milieus/groups in political life, etc.²¹⁶).

Salafism is burgeoning in the entire region, especially amongst young people. This process takes place both in the eastern and western parts of the region, and its intensity is strongest in the republic of Dagestan with its three million population. The radicalisation of youth is taking place despite federal and local repressions (which vary in severity depending on time²¹⁷) and efforts undertaken by the official Islamic clergy and Sufi groups (these latter are interconnected with official Islam). In Chechnya, which is ruled in a dictatorial manner by President Ramzan Kadyrov, a peculiar situation is in place – Sufi Islam is *de facto* the official Islam (a local branch of the Qadiriya order, which was established in the 12th century in Baghdad, and initiated in the Caucasus by a 19th century Chechen Sheikh Kunta-haji Kishiev). Other forms of Islam are either limited or even combated (for example: the present informal coercion to participate in Qadiriya rites, especially Dhikr; the persecution of men growing Salafi-style beards and women wearing hijabs, which are thought to be Salafi

²¹⁵ For example sharia courts, which settle private law disputes, operate in all of the republic's regions; the informal order for women employed in public institutions and studying at university to wear head scarves; substantial limits imposed on the sale of alcohol, Chechen authorities' *de facto* support of polygamy (which is theoretically penalised under Russian law).

²¹⁶ Besides Chechnya, an especially strong influence of political Islam can be seen in Dagestan. Despite there being no Islamic political parties active there, many Dagestani politicians refer to Islam. Other Islamic actors also play an important political role. These include both the Sufi leaders, who gather informal religious, political and business groups around themselves, often with their own armed wing (militants); and the official clergy within the Spiritual Board of Dagestan's Muslims (SBDM).

²¹⁷ In 2010 an unprecedented, formalised Sufi-Salafi dialogue was initiated by the Dagestani leader Magomedislam Magomedov. Representatives of the SBDM and Salafi organisation Association of Ahlus Sunna Scholars took part reoccurring meetings and theological debates. The dialog helped to partially calm the situation in Dagestan. It was halted due Kremlin's pressure following the death of key Dagestani Sufi leader – Sheikh Said Effendi Chirkeyski (who was killed in an attack probably executed by the militants in August of 2012), and forced resignation of Magomedov, whose successor was a radical opponent of soft policies – Ramazan Abdulatipov. A new wave of repressions took place afterwards, moving in line with other radical steps undertaken in the security sphere prior to the Sochi Olympics.

etc.). Salafists are being persecuted and forced to conceal their beliefs. An enduring element of the religious situation, in place since the 1990s, is the severe conflict between the Sufi brotherhoods and Salafists, with both of the sides resorting to violence on multiple occasions. In the Salafi-Sufi conflict, the state is visibly supporting the Sufi groups. The conflict between Sufis and Salafists is simultaneously a conflict between generations, with Sufis perceiving themselves as defenders of the tradition, while the Salafists regard them as heretics and polytheists.

Despite the persecutions, most of the Salafi communities in the Northern Caucasus are of a peaceful character, with their ties to the clandestine militancy not being evident (these rather have an individual character, also in the case of joining the jihad in the Caucasus or in Syria). Nevertheless, the Caucasus's Salafists (especially in Dagestan) do not conceal their ultimate goal of establishing sharia rule in the region. This is not, however, synonymous with breaking off from the Russian Federation. The situation is especially unique in Dagestan. In the other republics the Salafi communities exclusively take the form of informal circles, concentrated in towns and larger villages, at times gathered around a particular local leader or mosque, while in Dagestan an additional dimension of Salafism is present in the form of "Salafi villages". These are villages spread around the entire republic, and all or a majority of their inhabitants are Salafists. In these villages it is the sharia, rather than the state legislation, which is the *de facto* law of land. The inhabitants try to avoid any contacts with the state (in extreme cases, they don't even accept pensions or other social benefits from the "infidel" state)²¹⁸.

The Islamic clandestine militancy (the scattered armed groups operating under the banner of the Caucasus Emirate or the Islamic State), as with the Salafi groups, has become a lasting element of the region's political landscape. It is so deeply covert, and in some republics sufficiently rooted in the local mafia/political settings (demanding ransom from businessmen and officials, organising attacks based on orders from local politicians etc.) and is supported by a narrow group of followers and family, that it seems impossible to entirely root it out. On the other hand, the militants are too weak to go beyond the tactic they

²¹⁸ Examples of such villages include Gimry, Vremenniy (Untsukul'sky district), Gubden (Karabudakhkent'skiy district) or Novosasily (Khasavyurt district). These Salafi communities were established due to both ideological factors, and the socio-economic factors (corruption, inefficiency of the authorities etc.).

have used for years of limited guerrilla/terrorist warfare²¹⁹, and launch an armed conflict on a larger scale (not to mention attempts to exert control over a given area). This is caused by the militants' weakness (a lack of experienced leaders, exhaustion from the many years of war), the strength and efficiency of the Russian and local security forces which make use of brutal methods to combat the militancy, as well as a lack of sufficient social support (the majority of the society does not support Jihadists' slogans, but does view their fight for social justice favourably. This, though, for the militants themselves is inseparably linked to establishment of an Islamic state). While recently the militants ceased to conduct terrorist attacks on a larger scale (according to the instructions issued by the Caucasus Emirate's leader Aliaskhab Kebekov in 2014²²⁰), it cannot be ruled out that they will return to this tactic in the future.

Both the Salafism and the Islamic militancy in the Northern Caucasus are phenomena which formed locally, in line with the logic of the socio-political processes in the region. External influence, including events taking place in the Islamic world, can affect them but do not have the final word on whether they come into existence or on their vector of development. Jihad in the Middle East, the exodus of volunteers from the Caucasus or the establishment of an Islamic State in Syria and Iraq are of interest to the militants or, more broadly, to Muslims in the Caucasus, but they do not have a direct influence on these phenomena. Furthermore, they currently are a stabilising factor in the region, since they result in divisions within the Islamic clandestine militancy (disputes regarding swearing an oath to the self-proclaimed caliph, the priority of jihad in the Caucasus versus the one in Syria).

It also important in the local context to examine the rift which took place in the Islamic militancy (end of 2014) and the appearance in the region of units pledging loyalty to Islamic State (about a dozen armed groups in Dagestan and Chechnya²²¹). The renunciation of loyalty towards the emir of the Caucasus

²¹⁹ Current operations of the militants in the Caucasus – contrary to the situation several years ago, when they were capable of carrying out larger attacks – consist mainly of organising individual acts of terror (killing members of the security forces and administration, leaders of the Sufi brotherhoods, official Islam's clerics; attacks on stores selling alcohol and brothels, exhorting ransoms from business people).

²²⁰ <http://goloslama.ru/news.php?id=24196>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mtDHhSbTxFg>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8GTfot8hBEs>

²²¹ Those pledging an oath to the Caliph include: the Emir of Chechnya Aslan Byutukayev, the so-called supreme commander of Dagestan Rustam Asilderov (Emir Abu Muhammad), Emirs of Makhachkala, Khasavyurt, Kyzlyurt, southern Dagestan and several Chechen commanders (for example the influential commander Makhran Saidov).

took place not as a result of IS actions in the region, but rather due to a serious crisis which the Caucasus Emirate has been going through for last few years (problems with financing, a lack of experienced commanders, the low authority of its leaders, the loss of social support, the decimation of its militants at the hands of the Russian security forces, the exodus of recruits to the Middle East). Pledging loyalty to the caliph was not only a sign of the fascination Caucasian militants have for ISIS successes, but also an act of despair stemming from worsening conditions. Inspiration from the post-Soviet militants within IS's ranks is of some – but not decisive – influence. These stoked the rift, hoping to strengthen their own position within Islamic State's structures (by establishing units in their home region loyal to the caliph). Despite the Russian authorities claiming that the above mentioned events constitute a direct threat for Russia, there is not much evidence suggesting Islamic State's interest in waging or supporting jihad in the Caucasus. Pledging an oath of allegiance to the caliph most probably had only a declarative character, and in reality will not influence the events in the region. Its only tangible (and, from Russia's viewpoint, beneficial) consequence will be a deepening of the divisions within the militancy in the Caucasus which, in return, will lead to a further weakening of the militants²²².

The situation in Russia itself and the Russian policy towards the region has a much bigger influence over the Northern Caucasus. Maintaining economic and political stability in the Russian Federation, as well as the continuity of the Kremlin regime, will be synonymous with the conservation of the current situation in the Northern Caucasus (the region's permanent, but controllable instability). A serious economic crisis and/or political turmoil in Russia leading to a weakening of the Kremlin's control over the region would spell an instant deterioration of the situation in the Caucasus (open ethnic conflicts, an explosion of Islamic radicalism) and a probable escalation of violence, especially when bearing in mind that the Caucasus can be used instrumentally for power plays on the Russian political scene (as it was in the 1990s). An optimistic scenario sees the situation in the region stabilising and the processes (the growing civilisational gap between the Caucasus and Russia, re-Islamisation, de-Russification) which have been underway there for the last twenty years will moving back due to the Caucasus's integration with the rest of the Russian Federation and attempts to solve the systemic socio-political and economic

²²² Renouncing loyalty to the Emir of the Caucasus by a substantial part of the militants stirred heated debate amongst the supporters of the Caucasus Emirate and Islamic State, both those in the Caucasus and the Middle East.

problems. This seems impossible, though, due to lack of political will, concepts and resources to carry out such a plan.

2. Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan's distinctive trait, that differentiates it from other post-Soviet states inhabited by Muslims, is the coexistence of Shias and Sunnis there, with proportions between the two denominations difficult to unambiguously estimate. Traditionally Azerbaijan was dominated by Shias, but the Soviet heritage caused a considerable part of Azerbaijanis (if not the majority of them) to declare themselves as simply being Muslims, and to view the divisions and conflicts between Shia and Sunni Islam negatively. Furthermore, after the collapse of the USSR, a dynamic growth, or even expansion, of the Sunni communities can be observed. Shias dominate in the south of the country and on the Absheron Peninsula, while the Sunni are dominant in the country's north and west²²³. The division between Sunnis and Shias is not the only one within Azerbaijan's Islam, which can be characterised by extraordinary internal diversity: from radical communities and Shia organisations, through Sufi brotherhoods and movements inspired and supported by Turkey (mainly the followers of the Fethullah Gülen movement, known in Azerbaijan as the "Nursist"), to radical Salafi communities.

Despite such diversity, Azerbaijani Islam is not beleaguered by internal conflicts. The reason for this is the socio-political settings. Azerbaijan is a secular country, ruled by a secular establishment which views Islam as a threat for the stability of the state and of the ruling elite, and simultaneously is strong enough to control and the religious movements and to keep them on a short leash, often by use of repressions. The stance of Azerbaijani society is also of great importance – on the whole society is distanced to religion, treating Islam as only one part of the much more important ethnic identity (this is in line with the national state ideology promoted by the authorities).

Nevertheless, the role of the Islamic factor is growing in Azerbaijan. There are several reasons for this phenomenon: a continuing Islamisation, which is a response to the ideological crisis after the fall of the USSR, Turkish (above

²²³ Sociological survey conducted by Azerbaijani analyst, social activist and human rights defender – Arif Yunusov, showed that 57.6% of individuals questioned described themselves as being simply Muslims, 29.6% as being Shia and 8.9% as Sunni. More in: Arif Yunusov, *Islam in Azerbaijan*, Baku 2004, page 310.

all the Fethullah Gülen movement) and, to a lesser extent, Iranian activity, disenchantment with the West, whose policies are viewed by Azerbaijanis as being cynical (valuing energy cooperation with Baku more than democratic principles). The consequences of the authoritarian regime being tightened are of great importance; it is accompanied by repressions against all independent groups and milieus (not only Islamic ones, but also democratic and pro-European ones). The lack of possibility to express protest under the conditions of a police state causes social frustration, the main cause of which is the negative economic situation (the unequal distribution of wealth between society and the elite from the export of hydrocarbons), is often channelled into religion. The growth of independent Islamic circles is also the result of a lack of trust towards the Spiritual Board of Muslims of the Caucasus and its low authority (which, just as its Soviet predecessor, aspires to have authority over Muslims in the entire Caucasus, which is in reality limited to Azerbaijan); it is in fact a government institution.

Shia organisations and communities are developing mainly in the country's south and on the Absheron Peninsula (several Shia villages, centred on Nardaran, who are well-known for their radicalism). This traditionally devout and pro-Iranian part of society tries not only to live according to sharia law, but has also on numerous occasions showed an interest in socio-political issues (for example the 2010 protests in Nardaran over the ban on wearing head scarves in schools)²²⁴. Based on this community, and probably inspired by Iran, the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan was established in the 1990s. In 2003 it was declared illegal by the authorities. Besides that, there are several independent Shia Imams active Azerbaijan (for example Ilgar Ibrahimoglu) and organisations, which are clearly oriented towards Iran (several of their leaders studied there). It precisely the real or perceived connection with Iran that hinders the growth of Shia organisations and institutions: both the authorities and a substantial part of society regard Shias as a fifth column of Iran—a country which most Azerbaijanis view negatively.

The moderate Turkish socio-political/religious Fethullah Gülen movement is an important Islamic group in Azerbaijan²²⁵. It developed dynamically in the 1990s (opening its own schools, business activity, financing the construction

²²⁴ <http://in.reuters.com/article/2010/12/10/idINIndia-53485920101210>

²²⁵ More on the Fethullah Gülen movement: Marek Matusiak, *The great leap. Turkey under Erdogan*, *OSW Point of view*, June 2015 available at: <http://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/point-view/2015-05-27/great-leap-turkey-under-erdogan>

of new mosques and religious schools, creating an informal network of supporters, including high government officials and military circles) due to the enthusiasm present in Azerbaijan (shared also by the authorities) towards cooperation with Turkey. Baku's relations towards the movement, and more generally towards Turkish social, religious and cultural activities in Azerbaijan, took a downward turn when the AKP came to power in Ankara in 2002. It was caused by fears of the dissemination of the AKP's Islamic agenda in Azerbaijan, and resulted in the rise of an animus not only towards Turkey as such, but also towards the institutions associated with Turkey (including the Gülen movement). Repressions targeting institutions and individuals linked the Gülen movement visibly increased by the end of 2013 when in Turkey itself an open conflict between Erdogan and Gülen erupted. These actions did not thus meet with a negative reaction from Ankara²²⁶.

Salafi communities are also growing dynamically, with numbers estimated at between 10-25,000 people across the country²²⁷. They are concentrated mainly in Baku (groups linked to the two, currently closed, mosques – the so called Lezgin mosque and Abu Bakr mosque, led by charismatic leader Qamet Suleymanov), as well as in northern and north-western Azerbaijan, where Sunnis dominate (Zaqatala, Qakh, Khachmaz, Qusar, Quba, Sheki). The growth of Salafism in regions bordering Russia is closely linked to the proximity of Dagestan and the problem of ethnic minorities living in north Azerbaijan (Lezgins, Avars, Tzakhurs, Rutuls; about 3-400,000 thousand people in total), who in the face of a forced Azerbaijanisation policy and ethnically motivated persecutions, turn to Salafism and Islamic radicalism (mainly young people). The city of Sumgait (400 inhabitants, located about 30 kilometres north of Baku) is another important centre of Salafism in Azerbaijan. Here the social problems are the bedrock for Salafism (for example unemployment). These were caused by the closures of petrochemical factories operating during Soviet times. The settlement of the socially marginalised refugees from the Karabakh conflict zone is another cause of the Salafism's growth there²²⁸.

²²⁶ The culmination of the actions aimed against the Fethullah Gülen movement was the state closing Gülen-linked schools in Azerbaijan (beginning of 2014); <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/azerbaijan-shuts-down-gulen-linked-schools-.aspx?pageID=238&nID=67988&NewsCatID=355>. More on the Gülen movement in Azerbaijan: <http://www.hudson.org/research/9864-the-gulen-movement-in-azerbaijan>

²²⁷ <http://almanac.afpc.org/Azerbaijan>

²²⁸ Sumgait has also a small community of the so-called Harijis, whose Salafi views are much more radical than those of the general Salafi public (for example they do not recognise the state's laws and view participation in the global jihad as mandatory). In 2013 clashes be-

Militant Islam is also present in Azerbaijan, but its scale pales in comparison to that of the Northern Caucasus. From the beginning of the 2000s several minor armed incidents took place in the country (for example clashes with the security forces and attacks on them in the north of the country, a grenade attack on the Abu Bakr mosque in Baku in 2008). Most of them were perpetrated by radicals who splintered from the group formed around Qamet Suleymanov and militants who previously fought in the Northern Caucasus (for example Ilgar Mollachiev). In 2008 they tried to establish (probably with assistance from Dagestani militants) armed groups in northern Azerbaijan (the so called Forest Brothers) and Sumgait, but they were dismantled during a police operation. Several hundred Azerbaijani Muslims, starting from 1999, have also fought in the Northern Caucasus, as well as in Afghanistan and Pakistan (between 1999 and 2013 at least 33 citizens of Azerbaijan were killed while fighting in the Northern Caucasus, and 23 in Afghanistan; in total around 200-250 Azerbaijanis have fought in Afghanistan)²²⁹.

The Islamic factor (including the participation of Azerbaijanis in jihad in the Middle East), has limited influence due to the society's distancing towards socially and politically active Islam and the secular character of the Azerbaijani state and regime. It does not thus constitute a serious challenge for Azerbaijan's security and stability. Potential Islam-related threats are secondary, as they are derived from threats of a political nature. In the internal dimension, the risk of the destructive activation of Islamic groups (including militant Islam) and conflict breaking out between particular Islamic currents (especially between the Shias and Sunnis²³⁰), seems possibly only were there to be a serious political crisis (caused for example by social unrest). In the external dimension, the Islamic factor can be exploited by outside actors (mainly Russia and Iran) to destabilise the situation in Azerbaijan and/or influence country's foreign policy.

A particularly large risk is associated with Russian policy towards Azerbaijan. Russia is trying to rebuild its position in the post-Soviet area, and in the case of Azerbaijan its goal is to pressure Baku into cooperation with Moscow (for

tween the Salafists and Harijis broke out, based on a dispute regarding the mandatory status of participating in the jihad in Syria. So far, however, the Harijis have not carried out any armed or terrorist attacks in Sumgait itself. They are under constant surveillance by the Azerbaijani security services: <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/68341>

²²⁹ <http://jihadology.net/2014/01/28/guest-post-azerbaijani-foreign-fighters-in-syria>

²³⁰ <http://carnegieendowment.org/2013/03/18/syrian-crisis-view-from-azerbaijan>

example in the energy sphere), and in the maximum scenario – for Azerbaijan to participate in the Eurasian integration projects. Besides the political pressure and proposals of mutually beneficial concessions (for example Eurasian integration in exchange for a settlement of the Karabakh conflict on Baku's terms), Moscow can make use of a wide range of leverage. Along with the Karabakh issue (provoking of renewed hostilities), the threat of militant Islam can be a tool which Russia could relatively easily use, combining the Islamic factor with the Lezgin problem (separatism). Despite the commonly held belief to the contrary, Moscow would not create a serious threat for its own territory by undertaking such measures²³¹.

To some extent, Baku's fears regarding Iran's actions may be commensurate to the threat posed by the latter (in the past Iran has undertaken a number of actions aimed at developing its influence over Azerbaijan's Shias). However, with regard to the internal situation in Azerbaijan, Iran has less leverage than Moscow. Islamic State's goals do not include destabilisation of the situation in the Caucasus and thus also does not constitute a threat to Azerbaijan.

The Azerbaijani authorities seem aware of the above threats but, due to their constant fear of social unrest, breaking out and viewing the world through the lens of an embattled mentality (fears regarding Russia, a West-inspired "Maidan", Iran and Turkey), the preventive policies they apply (repressions against independent Islamic movements) bring effects opposite to those desired i.e. they lead to the radicalisation of Muslim communities and their shift to clandestine activities.

3. Georgia

The situation of Muslims in Georgia is unique when compared to all of the other states of the Caucasus and Central Asia (excluding Armenia, where no local Muslim community exists). Muslims in Georgia constitute a minority. Furthermore they function in a state and society, in which the influence of religion (Eastern Orthodox) is one of the strongest in the post-Soviet area. Georgian Muslims live mainly in Kvemo Kartli (Azeris), Adjara (Georgians professing

²³¹ Raising the Lezgin issue (even if interconnected with the Islamic factor) would not threaten increased destabilisation in Dagestan. On the contrary, the support given to the Azerbaijani Lezgins would provide Moscow with enormous support in Dagestan and mobilisation of its inhabitants against Azerbaijan (anti-Azerbaijani sentiment is very strong in Dagestan). Furthermore, the case of Russian actions in Donbas shows that Russia does not view zones of instability close to its borders as a threat to its internal security.

Islam) and Kakheti (Chechens in the Pankisi Gorge, Azeris and Avars). Small Muslim communities are also present in Tbilisi (about 20,000 people) and the breakaway region of Abkhazia (several thousand people) which is not controlled by the Georgian authorities. In total, there are about 450,000 Muslims in Georgia, which equates to around 10% of the population²³².

The situation of Muslims in the above mentioned regions differs, as do the problems – both those they face and those generated by Islam itself. On a nationwide level there are two major Islam-related challenges: the risk of tensions between Muslims and Christians escalating, and the risk of external actors (Russia, Turkey and Iran) playing the Islamic card to intervene in Georgia's internal affairs to strengthen their position in the Southern Caucasus. The first problem is present first of all in Adjara and, on a local level, in selected villages in other parts of the country (for example Guria or Samtskhe-Javakheti), to which since the Soviet times Adjara's Muslims have been relocated from the regions in Adjara which were at risk of mud slides (which threatened entire villages). Conflicts between the Eastern Orthodox Christians and Muslims usually erupt over the building of a mosque, minaret or public Islamic celebrations. It is noteworthy that after the Georgian Dream coalition rose to power (2012-2013) such conflicts visibly intensified²³³. Pressure is exerted on Muslims living in Adjara by the Georgian Eastern Orthodox Church, the Christian majority (Muslims make up approximately only 30% of Adjara's population) and, in a concealed manner, also by the authorities (the Church's privileged position, the lack of financial support for Muslim communities). This results on the one hand in Adjara's Muslims converting to Christianity (the process began after the fall of the USSR), and on the other with the radicalisation of some them. However, in Adjara there are no Salafi communities, nor is there any credible evidence that shows Jihadists from Adjara fighting in the Middle East.

²³² <http://kavpolit.com/musulmanskaya-obshhina-gruzii-k-voprosu-upravleniya-i-religioznoj-praktiki/> and https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/295315/March_14_Islam_in_Georgia_final.doc

²³³ The biggest incident of this sort was the conflict surrounding the building of a minaret in the Chela village of Samtskhe-Javakheti in 2013. For more see: <http://dfwatch.net/minaret-conflict-in-chela-georgia-still-unresolved-23762>. Plans to build a new mosque in Batumi also generate problems: <http://dfwatch.net/adjara-changes-its-decision-to-allow-new-mosque-in-batumi-60860>. Incidents occurred also in Kobuleti (protests against opening of a new madrasa: <http://georgia.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/248998/>) and Moha village in Samtskhe-Javakheti (protests of Muslims, who were against building a community centre in a place where a mosque destroyed by the Soviets once stood: <http://georgia.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/248998/>).

Adjarian Muslims (regardless of where they live) are also an object of Turkey's constant attention. Turkey supports the building of mosques, religious schools, propagates studying at Turkish universities (and madrassas), and also provides humanitarian and developmental aid (for example the renovation of schools) for the Adjarian communities spread around the whole of Georgia. When Turkey's position in Georgia is strengthened via these actions, it causes not only fears over Ankara's actual intentions (accusations of making early preparations for territorial claims against Georgia) and the rise of anti-Turkish sentiment, but also a hostile attitude towards the Adjara's Muslims among in Georgian society, who are generally viewed through the lens of monolithic ethnic-religious identity (the stereotype of a Georgian - Eastern Orthodox Christian)²³⁴.

Iran has a similar policy in place which is focused on the Azeri Shias in eastern Georgia. From the beginning of the 1990 several pro-Iranian organisations have been active in Kvemo Kartli and Tbilisi, Iran supports the construction of Shia mosques and madrassas, and provides scholarships for local youth to study in Iran (mainly in Qom and Mashhad). Pro-Iranian organisations in Marneuli (the informal capital of the Georgian Azeris) also attempted to politically activate the local Azerbaijani populations (for example through protests against the hijab ban in Azerbaijan). Iranian policy has so far achieved derisory results, mainly due to the low level of religiosity of the Georgian Azeris who in most part can be regarded as cultural Muslims. Iranian activity, however, runs against Azerbaijan's interests - Baku too is attempting to operate within the Azeri minority in Georgia but, based on the ethnic factor (support for cultural activities, activation of the Azeri population, developing contacts with organisations from Azerbaijan, support for the Azeri language in schools). Therefore the Azeri community in Georgia is a *de facto* battleground for Iranian-Azerbaijani rivalry.

As an attempt to limit the influence of Turkey, Iran and Azerbaijan on Georgian Muslims, the Georgian authorities took steps to establish a Soviet model of "managing" the Muslim community - creating in 2011 the Spiritual Boards of the Muslims of Eastern and Western Georgia (which include both Shias and

²³⁴ More on the situation in Adjara and the Muslim-Eastern Orthodox tensions: Giorgi Sanikidze, Edward W. Walker, Islam and Islamic Practices in Georgia, University of Berkeley 2004, http://iseees.berkeley.edu/bps/publications/2004_04-sani.pdf, Thomas Liles, Islam and Religious Transformation in Adjara, http://www.ecmi.de/uploads/tx_lfpubdb/Working_Paper_57_En.pdf

Sunnis). One of the consequences of this was to transfer outside of the jurisdiction of the Board of Muslims of the Caucasus in Baku (a legacy of Soviet times) led by Allahshukur Pashazade. Both of the Georgian boards attempt to take over formal control of all Islamic communities and institutions (mosques, madrassas, media etc.), but despite support from the state, their efforts yield limited results.

The existence of a large Salafi community in the Pankisi Gorge (amongst the young Salafists are a majority) is a problem of a local character, as are the deep divisions between the Salafists and the older generation, which does not regard religion as being important. The effect of the social processes taking place in Pankisi (if they are not interrupted by more severe shocks) will probably be the establishment of a sharia enclave in the gorge in several years, where Islamic law will be the *de facto*, but not formal, legal system. The existence of the enclave itself does not constitute a threat to state security (Chechens from Pankisi are loyal towards Georgia), however, the superimposition of the religious problem on the socio-economic ones (unemployment, the lack of perspectives, combined with large demographic growth) can be dangerous. The problem may further grow in the case of a weakening of the central government's power, took place prior to the Rose Revolution. In this scenario, Pankisi could transform into a "black hole" – a safe haven for organised crime and Islamic terrorism.

In Georgia, except for Pankisi, several other small Salafi communities exist (for example in Kvemo Kartli, Kakheti, Tbilisi), but they are small and apolitical enough not to cause a challenge to the country's stability. The situation could change only if the authorities were to begin repressing those communities. There is also a small Salafi community in Abkhazia, but due to Tbilisi's lack of control over the republic, its existence does not influence the internal situation in Georgia.

It does not seem possible for Islam in Georgia to generate endogenous threats for the stability and security of the state, mainly because of the fact that the Muslim community in Georgia (including the Salafis) enjoys freedom of actions and is not subjected to restrictions imposed by the state; however, in contrast to the favoured orthodox Church, it also cannot count on its support. Being a minority, the Georgian Muslims are loyal towards the state, and the tensions between them (for example between Shias and Salafists) do not have the potential to develop into serious conflicts. Nor is there any evidence to suggest, that the Jihadists returning to Georgia (mainly the inhabitants of Pankisi,

but also a small number of Azeris) can constitute a serious threat to the state's security and stability.

The growing tensions between the Muslims and Christians are a much more serious challenge. These are to a large extent caused by the aggressive policies of the Georgian Eastern Orthodox Church and growing anti-Muslim sentiment in society. The level of risk is being elevated by the fact that such conflicts, similar to the situation in Pankisi or ethnic problems, can be potentially exploited by Russia to destabilise the internal situation in Georgia in order to derail Tbilisi's pro-Western course and re-establish Russian influence in the country. A factor which even further increases the risk is the Church's ambiguous stance on Russia, and its anti-Western, anti-Turkish and anti-Islamic position.

4. Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan – politically the most stable and economically developed country in Central Asia – is not free from problems related to Islamic radicalism. Since the fall of the Soviet Union Salafism and Islamic fundamentalism (above all the Hizb ut-Tahrir movement) have developed there. In contrary to the region's other states, during the first twenty years of independence Kazakhstan did not face any problems related to militant Islam. The situation changed only in 2011, when the country witnessed a series of terrorist attacks conducted by local radicalised Salafists²³⁵. Currently, in the context of Islam-related threats in Kazakhstan, the following problems occur: the possibility of a renewal of acts of Islamic terrorism, Kazakhstan's citizens departing to fight in the ranks of Islamic terrorist organisations (mainly to Syria and Iraq), and the potential risk of religion-based social unrest.

The possibility of terrorist attacks repeating themselves is the most important issue from Astana's point of view. The problem itself is a real one – the social bedrock, in the form of radicalised Salafists, still exists in Kazakhstan, but their negative potential is currently neutralised by the departures to Syria and partially by Astana's policy towards them. Kazakhstan's authorities have a two-speed policy in this dimension: they use both "hard" methods, the aim of which is the immediate liquidation of a threat, applied to individuals suspected of terrorist activity; and also social actions, calculated to achieve a long term

²³⁵ Described earlier in Chapter I – From the return to faith to jihad: Salafism and militant Islam in the post-Soviet area in the textbox – The radicalisation of Salafists in Kazakhstan.

effect. The first way includes traditional methods used by the security forces of the post-Soviet states: mass arrests and convictions of individuals suspected of terrorism (at times based only on dubious trace evidence)²³⁶ and a harshening of the laws regulating the operations of religious communities²³⁷. On the other hand it is possible to observe soft methods advanced by the Agency for Religious Affairs (which is one of the main state institutions dealing with the issue of Islamic radicalism), such as tolerating, or even supporting, the activities of peaceful Salafists (some of whom have wider leverage on Salafists on the entire post-Soviet area, for example Rinat Abu Muhammad al-Kazakhstan²³⁸), increased activity of official Islamic institutions²³⁹ and the intense socialisation of individuals sentenced for extremism and terrorism²⁴⁰. The strategy chosen by Astana so far turned out to be successful (since 2012 there have been no attacks in Kazakhstan), but in the long term perspective its success will depend on the coherence of the activities undertaken, the continuation of the soft stance towards the general Salafi public and refraining from measure which may antagonise this community towards the state.

The next challenge linked to Islamic radicalism in Kazakhstan are the departures of Kazakh volunteers to Syria and Iraq (and, to a much smaller extent, also to Afghanistan and Pakistan). This is not a new phenomenon – in the past Kazakhstan’s citizens did travel, on a smaller scale, to fight in the ranks of radical Islamic groups in the Caucasus²⁴¹, as well as in Afghanistan and Pakistan²⁴². Departures to Syria, therefore, do not constitute a new quality, but quantitatively it is a bigger phenomenon. The participation of Kazakh volunteers in the civil war in Syria – despite numerous speculations that their return may lead to a deterioration of the security situation²⁴³ – as in other states, acts largely as a stabilising factor (eliminating the most active individuals from the country).

²³⁶ http://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/v-kazahstane-sotni-chelovek-sidyat-za-ekstremizm-i-terrorizm-229238/

²³⁷ http://www.rferl.org/content/kazakhstan_new_religious_law_islam_extremism/24341450.html

²³⁸ <http://islamic.kz/tag/rinat-abu-muxammad/>

²³⁹ Primarily of the Spiritual Board of Muslims of Kazakhstan: <http://muftyat.kz/ru>

²⁴⁰ Such actions, regardless of their efficiency, show Astana’s acknowledgement of the problems that such individuals might cause after they leave prison: http://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/glava-mvd-rasskazal-pravdu-o-sostoyanii-spetsuchrejdenny-kazahstana-263687/

²⁴¹ Above all Chechens residing in Kazakhstan: <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/195407/>

²⁴² About 200 people, both ethnic Kazakhs and individuals of other ethnicities present in Kazakhstan. See further in: *The radical Islamic militants of Central Asia...*, *op. cit.*

²⁴³ <http://news.nur.kz/288156.html>

Both the return of Kazakh militants from Syria as such, and their possible participation in acts of terror is rather unlikely – the attacks in 2011-2012 were conducted by local radicalised Salafists, not by Kazakh militants who previously fought in the ranks of terrorist organisations. Nevertheless, these departures are being viewed as a threat by Astana, with the authorities undertaking a number of steps aimed at preventing them (for example simplifying the procedures needed to recognise an organisation as extremist and to block the websites used for recruiting)²⁴⁴.

One of the largest internal challenges for Kazakhstan's stability, besides the unresolved issue of the succession of power after President Nursultan Nazarbayev, are the social tensions. While at present these are above all economic-based social tensions, expressing themselves mainly in workers strikes (for example the events in Zhanaozen in December 2011), it is possible that similar conflicts may occur due to other reasons. Nor can it be ruled out that religion may become an ideology of social protest, which would certainly lead to an increased role of Islamic fundamentalism.

5. Kyrgyzstan

The factor which distinguishes Kyrgyzstan from the rest of the region is the relative freedom of action enjoyed by the Islamic organisations operating in the country. The example of Kyrgyzstan shows that, when there are no mass repressions aimed at Islamic fundamentalists in place, the threats stemming from them decrease. Similarly – legally functioning independent, at times radical, organisations of a peaceful nature can be a counterbalance for radical Islamic militancy. The media and some politicians often raises the issue of the numerous departures for Syria, which occur mainly in the country's south²⁴⁵. However they do not constitute a serious challenge to the state's security (especially in comparison with other challenges which Kyrgyzstan faces²⁴⁶). Nor do

²⁴⁴ <http://infozakon.com/authorities-and-policy/447-nazarbaev-podpisal-zakon-po-usileniyu-mer-protiv-ekstremizma-i-terrorizma.html>

²⁴⁵ http://www.vb.kg/doc/284803_pravozashitniki_v_sirii_vouut_primerno_170_kyrgyzstanccev.html

²⁴⁶ Kyrgyzstan has a wide array of structural security problems and challenges, which include: the state's weakness and inefficiency, social and ethnic conflicts, tensions with neighbouring countries etc. More in: Maciej Falkowski, Józef Lang, Hostages to Moscow, clients of Beijing. Security in Central Asia as the role of the West diminishes, *OSW Studies*, November 2014, <http://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-studies/2014-10-28/hostages-to-moscow-clients-beijing-security-central-asia-role-west>

they form a new quality (many volunteers from Kyrgyzstan have fought earlier in Afghanistan and Pakistan). Radical Islamic militants can potentially be a threat to Kyrgyzstan but only if serious instability and a security crisis occur in the country. The Islamic factor, however, will serve as a catalyst for neither of those.

Fundamentalist and extreme Islamic organisations enjoy considerable freedom of action in Kyrgyzstan, which is related to both the democratic character of the state, and the general weakness of its structures. There are many extreme Islamic organisations in operation in Kyrgyzstan. Tablighi Jamaat is one example of this. This organisation, while adhering to extreme Islam²⁴⁷ and actively seeking support amongst the political elite²⁴⁸, does not back armed struggle, instead focusing mainly on proselytising (it operates legally in many countries in Asia and Europe). In Central Asia Tablighi Jamaat is banned²⁴⁹. Kyrgyzstan is the exception to that rule, where the organisation has several thousand members²⁵⁰ and is *de facto* aiding to stabilise the situation – by gathering together the active individuals, it lowers the level of radicalisation in the extreme part of the Muslim community²⁵¹.

In Kyrgyzstan even the illegal fundamental organisations have larger freedom of action than in the other countries of the region. The largest such organisation – Hizb ut-Tahrir, prior to 2010 was operating in semi-overt manner, and while since that time the authorities have tightened the policies towards it (for example more frequent arrests of its members)²⁵², it still does not reach the level of persecutions present in Uzbekistan or Tajikistan. This, however, does not mean that there are no persecutions taking place in Kyrgyzstan. Arrests of Islamic fundamentalists treated as alleged terrorists happen from time to time, but the goal of it is to stage actions which can be portrayed as the law enforcement structures combating terrorism. Due to an overrepresentation of Uzbeks amongst the Fundamentalists (for example in Hizb ut-Tahrir), the ac-

²⁴⁷ Not Salafism, but the Deobandi school – established in the 19th century in India, a sub-continental version of the 18th century Saudi Wahhabism.

²⁴⁸ http://www.azattyk.org/content/kyrgyzstan_religion_deputy_security_nov2013/25188524.html

²⁴⁹ It is noteworthy that the organisation is also listed as being a terrorist organisation by the CSTO, whose members include Kyrgyzstan.

²⁵⁰ <http://www.islamsng.com/kgz/analytics/7471>

²⁵¹ http://www.vb.kg/doc/219086_myftiy_kyrgyzstana_otvel_podozreniia_ot_dvijenii_a_tabligi_djamaat.html

²⁵² <http://www.rferl.org/content/hizb-ut-tahrir-kyrgyzstan-arrests/25016322.html>

tivities of the Kyrgyz security forces can be interpreted as targeting not only Islamic fundamentalism, but also the local Uzbek community.

The events in Kyrgyzstan also show the interaction between ethnic animosities and radical Islam and Salafism. In June 2010, when ethnic animosities between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz erupted into open conflict, the rare places where Salafists lived in compact neighbourhoods did not see clashes or pogroms taking place (there were even cases of Kyrgyz Salafists sheltering their Uzbek co-believers from the Kyrgyz militias). On the other hand, despite fears of the opposite happening, radical Islamic organisations, such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, did not exploit the conflict to achieve their goals²⁵³, as their ranks include both Kyrgyz and Uzbeks²⁵⁴ – united by a common ideology; this shows the limits of radical Islam with regards to exploiting the ethnic conflicts. The conflict in the country's south also led to a rise in the influence of Salafism and other extreme Islamic currents, which are perceived by some as an ideology of peace, allowing the peaceful coexistence of the two communities. This in turn increased the already existing social bedrock (the country's south is traditionally more religious) for radicalisation and departures for Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria and Iraq, in order to join the ranks of terrorist organisations there.

6. Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan is an authoritarian state with a very strong and developed apparatus of control which views radical Islam as its main enemy. In practice, almost every occurrence, not only of Salafism, but also of piousness within the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam traditional to the region, is regarded as radicalism, and can result in persecution (including long prison sentences and torture)²⁵⁵. In Uzbekistan there is no serious threat of radical Islam – the level of the security services' control over society is immense, there are no radical Islamic organisations active in the country, and almost all volunteers from Uzbekistan who joined the ranks of Islamic terrorist organisations in Afghanistan or Syria, were recruited on-line while working in Russia or Turkey.

²⁵³ The IMU limited its reaction to issuing a statement in which the movement condemned violence between Muslims in the Fergana Valley.

²⁵⁴ During the conflict in south Kyrgyzstan the IMU's Emir was an Uzbek – Usman Odil, while its chief military commander was an ethnic Kyrgyz – Abbas Mansur.

²⁵⁵ Human Rights Watch Report – <http://www.hrw.org/world-report/2014/country-chapters/uzbekistan?page=2>

The persecution of Muslims has been underway since Uzbekistan gained its independence, and it is interlinked with combating the opposition. In the 1990s there were Islamic organisations²⁵⁶ and a secular opposition²⁵⁷ operating in the country, yet in the later period both of these were liquidated by the authorities. Despite this, the repressions (which also serve as an instrument of control over society) increased. Every occurrence of the profession of Islam outside of the norms set by the state and the institutions it controls, can be qualified as extremism or terrorism²⁵⁸. In the past Uzbekistan has suffered from the actions of Islamic radicalism (for example the second Batken crisis²⁵⁹), but during the last fifteen years only two attacks actually organised by Islamic terrorists took place there – all the other attacks were probably orchestrated as provocations by the authorities²⁶⁰. Up to several thousand Uzbek citizens are fighting, or have fought in the past, in the ranks of terrorist organisations (above all the IMU), but this does not take place in Uzbekistan, but rather in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Syria. Even the policy of Uzbekistan's government shows that Uzbek Islamic radicals do not currently constitute a threat to Uzbekistan itself – Uzbekistan is undertaking aggressive actions outside of its borders aimed at the anti-regime opposition (both those secular and moderately Islamic), but it has not undertaken similar steps against the Uzbek radicals' terrorist organisations²⁶¹.

²⁵⁶ For example the well-known Adolat in the Fergana Valley, also such organisations as Tauba or Islam Lashkarlary. Based on: Stanisław Zapaśnik, „Walczący islam” w Azji Centralnej..., *op. cit.*, pages 79-80.

²⁵⁷ For example Muhammad Salih's Erk (Freedom) party.

²⁵⁸ For example praying outside of the mosques (in which a wide network of informers operates), possession of classical Islamic literature or recordings of sermons delivered even by non-fundamentalist Islamic scholars: http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1942

²⁵⁹ Second Batken crisis – IMU militants' raids, launched from the territory of Tajikistan, on Kyrgyzstan's Batken province and fighting on a limited scale in Uzbekistan's Surxondaryo province and Yangiabad region, in proximity of Tashkent, all in August of 2000. The fighting led to dozens of fatalities and resulted in the IMU being forced to withdraw to Afghanistan. Further in footnote 36.

²⁶⁰ Conducted by the Islamic Jihad Union in Bukhara and Tashkent in 2004: <http://www.nefa-foundation.org/file/FeaturedDocs/nefaijuoct08.pdf>

²⁶¹ For example assassination attempt at opposition imam Obidhon Nazarov in 2012 in Sweden, where he resided as a political refugee; kidnapping of people from the territory of the Russian Federation: <http://enews.fergananews.com/articles/2789> and <http://www.uznews.net/ru/human-rights/26684-v-moskve-pohitili-uzbeka-kotoryj-mnogo-znajet-o-gulnarekarimovoj>

Despite large scale persecution²⁶², Islam in Uzbekistan is developing (for example the practice of religious rites is becoming increasingly popular²⁶³). One reason for this is Uzbekistan's massive labour migration – mainly to Russia (2.5 million people²⁶⁴), but also to Turkey. Uzbeks are radicalised and decide to leave for Syria precisely while they are abroad. Under current conditions, the return of Uzbek militants from Syria or Afghanistan to Uzbekistan is impossible, due to the repressions they would face. Nevertheless, Uzbekistan's authorities are exploiting the problem of the participation of its citizens in the war taking place outside of its borders to combat the opposition and to further tighten its grip on society. The only hypothetical situation in which Islamic fundamentalism and radicalism could start to play an important role in Uzbekistan is if a serious political and economic crisis were to occur there which would lead to the collapse of the state structures. A crisis of this kind is conceivable – the causes of it could be both the economic based social tensions which have been suppressed for years, or the infighting within the elite and a conflict over the transition of power after President Islam Karimov, who has been in office since 1991. However, it currently seems that the security services, which exert total control over society and the elite, would be able to cope with this situation and guide the state to a bloodless transition of power.

7. Tajikistan

Tajikistan is often singled out as a state, in which Islam plays the most important role, in contrast to other Central Asian states. It is the only state in the region where an Islamic political party, which until recently had seats in parliament, legally functions, and the level of practice of Islamic rites is probably the highest in the region. Simultaneously, a wide range of Islamic organisations, or even entire currents, are banned in Tajikistan, while the authorities take advantage of the issue of Islamic radicalism to combat the opposition and to tighten their grip on society; however, on a smaller scale than in Uzbekistan.

²⁶² In Uzbekistan about 12,000 people are currently serving prison sentences for alleged religious extremism: <http://www.hrw.org/world-report/2014/country-chapters/uzbekistan?page=2>

²⁶³ <http://fletcher.tufts.edu/~media/Fletcher/Microsites/praxis/xvi/Gaziev.pdf> and <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2015/01/torture-death-uzbek-muslims-jail-20151610254-7473124.html>

²⁶⁴ Russian Federal Migration Service data – <http://www.fms.gov.ru/about/statistics/data/details/54891/>

Political Islam has been present in Tajikistan since the beginning of its independence. One of the sides of the civil war (1992-1997) was the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT) which, according to the 1997 Moscow peace agreements, was to co-participate in ruling the state. This party, currently led by Muhiddin Kabiri, presents a very moderate Islamic stance²⁶⁵; for years it played the role of a licensed opposition – until March of 2015 the IRPT had two members in the 63-seat lower chamber of parliament and it has offices in the entire country. On the local level, the IRPT's more zealous activists are often persecuted by the local authorities²⁶⁶, and on the nationwide level, the party actually enjoys larger popular support than it polls in the elections²⁶⁷ and does not constitute a threat for the government. Despite this fact, the pressure exerted on the IRPT by the authorities has been on the rise for the last two years, one examples of which is how Kabiri was banned from running in the presidential election in 2013²⁶⁸, or how the party was not permitted to retain its seats in parliament in 2015²⁶⁹ (the elections in Tajikistan were not democratic, therefore it was a political decision, not a genuine outcome of the elections²⁷⁰). This shows a depletion of the party's formula to act as the licensed opposition (the political rivalry fault line currently runs within the Kulob-origin ruling elite), and in future can lead to the radicalisation of some of its activists, especially those active on the local level.

While it is true that Islamic fundamentalism and radicalism are present in Tajikistan, the events and groups which Dushanbe portrays as occurrences of it are not usually actually related to it. After the end of the civil war Tajikistan regularly witnessed clashes between government forces and armed groups with a declared Islamic character led by warlords who did not recognise the peace agreements. In most cases these conflicts were caused by political reasons, namely disputes between local warlords who controlled the situation in particular regions, and

²⁶⁵ Secular modernisation of the state combined with the propagation of Islamic values.

²⁶⁶ For example murder of the leader of IRPT structures in Khorugh: <http://www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php?st=1343416080>

²⁶⁷ According to Kabiri himself, in 2010 the support oscillated at around 35-40%, the election which took place then in Tajikistan was declared as undemocratic by the OSCE: <http://news.tj/en/node/108135> and <http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/69061?download=true>

²⁶⁸ Pressure by the authorities on Kabiri, for example the attack on his deputy – Makhmadali Khait: <http://tjinform.com/ru/news/20130422/06730.html> and <http://rus.azattyq.org/content/vibory-prezidenta-tadjikistan-kandidat-bobonazarova/25116733.html>

²⁶⁹ <http://www.avesta.tj/goverment/31046-vybory-partii-kabiri-zoyirova-i-shabdolova-ostalis-za-bortom.html>

²⁷⁰ <http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/tajikistan/143306?download=true>

the fact that the central government in Dushanbe which tried to extend its control over them (for example the clashes in the Rasht Valley in 2010²⁷¹). There are serious doubts also in the case of arrests of the alleged members of terrorist organisations conspiring to commit attacks in Tajikistan, which suggests that the actions of the Tajik security forces are of an ostentatious nature²⁷². That does not mean that Islamic terrorist organisations are not active in Tajikistan, but their activities are limited almost exclusively to the recruitment of volunteers, most of whom are recruited online during their stay in Russia (about 1.2 million Tajik labour migrants currently reside in the Russian Federation²⁷³). These actions are effective largely because a social bedrock for radicalisation exists in Tajikistan, in the form of structural poverty.

In the social dimension, the role of Islam in Tajikistan is increasing. This is visible for example in the number of mosques operating in the country (3,809), which is more than the number of schools²⁷⁴. The authorities actively combat not only occurrences of Islamic fundamentalism or extreme Islamic currents (both groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir or Tablighi Jamaat, and whole currents, such as Salafism, are illegal in Tajikistan²⁷⁵), but also the phenomenon of the Islamisation of society. In 2011 President Emomali Rahmon approved legislation which hindered the practice of Islam (and also of other religions), for example by banning minors from entering mosques (and other places of worship) and forbidding travelling abroad to receive religious education²⁷⁶. This met with criticism from organisations defending the freedom of belief²⁷⁷. In Tajikistan itself, due to the mass migration of the most active individuals, the possibility of social unrest caused by the above actions of the authorities is small. The dissatisfied individuals will probably still choose departure for Syria or Afghanistan rather than launching the fight at home.

²⁷¹ <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/61971>

²⁷² Regular large-scale arrests (at times of dozens of people) of people suspected of conspiring to conduct terrorist attacks, especially prior to visits of foreign dignitaries in Tajikistan, or President Rahmon's visits in country's provinces. For example: <http://lenta.ru/news/2014/04/09/talco>, <http://ria.ru/world/20130921/964854932.html>, <http://www.fergananews.com/news.php?id=17863> or <http://rus.ozodi.mobi/a/26644567.html>

²⁷³ Russian Federal Migration Service data - <http://www.fms.gov.ru/about/statistics/data/details/54891/>

²⁷⁴ 2012 data: http://www.rferl.org/content/tajikistan_mosques/24488099.html

²⁷⁵ <http://islamnews.tj/banned.html> and <http://www.centrasia.ru/news.php?st=1236149580>

²⁷⁶ <http://www.voanews.com/content/tajikistan-bans-minors-from-entering-mosques----126667408/168486.html>

²⁷⁷ http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1553

8. Turkmenistan

Despite Turkmenistan being Central Asia's most closed state, Islamic radicalism does exist there, as can be seen by the presence of Turkmen militants in the ranks of Islamic terrorist organisations in Afghanistan, Pakistan²⁷⁸ and Syria²⁷⁹. It is, however, a marginal phenomenon. As in the case of Uzbekistan or Tajikistan, the radicalisation takes place abroad, usually in Turkey, which is a traditional destination for Turkmen labour migrants. The links with Turkey also result in Syria being a more popular destination for the Turkmen radicals than Afghanistan and Pakistan²⁸⁰. Despite the totalitarian character of the state, followers of extreme Islamic currents are not persecuted more than society in general on condition that they do not reveal their beliefs. This is caused first of all by the marginal nature of this phenomenon in Turkmenistan, as a result of which the authorities do not perceive independent Islam, for example Salafism, as being a serious threat, but rather merely one more example of social self-organisation (which Ashgabat does consider a threat).

It is unlikely that the role of Islam in general, and Islamic fundamentalism and radicalism in particular, will increase—mainly due to the vast emigration of active individuals²⁸¹, the closed character of the state²⁸², and immense social problems²⁸³.

²⁷⁸ Seen for example in IMU propaganda materials, which portrayed militants from Turkmenistan fighting in Pakistan's Waziristan: <https://archive.org/details/QaboildaNimaGap3-qism>

²⁷⁹ <http://www.fergananews.com/news/20863>

²⁸⁰ Up to several hundred Turkmens are participating in the war in Syria: <http://www.rferl.org/content/turkmenistan-achilles-heel-central-asian-security/25265841.html>

²⁸¹ Due to the extremely low level of higher education and the high costs of bribes necessary to begin studies in Turkmenistan, up to ten thousand students leave the country annually, only some of whom return home after finishing their studies.

²⁸² Except for problems with leaving the country, an information blockade is in place – if in the other states of the region the radicalisation often happens via the Internet, in Turkmenistan the access to the Internet itself is physically limited.

²⁸³ The social problems include, a vast unemployment rate (reaching as much as 50%, especially in the rural areas and provinces) or mass drug abuse (lack of current data – in 2002 even up to 20% of the country's population suffered from drug addiction, this number now is probably even higher – it is caused by the appalling social situation and the low price of the heroin brought from Afghanistan – about 1 dollar per portion): <http://www.chrono-tm.org/2012/02/v-turkmenii-okolo-50-naseleniya-ne-imeyut-raboty/>, <http://www.dw.de/наркомания-в-туркмении-носит-масштабы-национального-бедствия/a-6363081>, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/2014/01/turkmenskiy-vsplesk-narkomanii/> and <http://www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php?st=1019641560>

9. Crimea

The Islamic issue in Crimea, including the problem of fundamentalism and radicalism, is naturally linked with the Tatar question. Crimean Tatars, who returned to the peninsula from their exile in Central Asia during the late Soviet period and shortly after the fall of USSR, constitute about 12-14% (250-300,000) of Crimea's population²⁸⁴. In the political dimension they were, and continue to be, the most pro-Ukrainian group in Crimea, detested by the other sections of the peninsula's society. While almost all Crimean Tatars are Muslims (Hanafi school Sunnis), the tensions are caused first of all by the ethnic factor (Slavic population vs. Tatars) and the socio-economic factor (the ownership issue, competition from Tatars etc.), rather than by religious factors. Nevertheless, the Islamic issue is present there, and its importance rose after Russia's annexation of Crimea which shattered the fragile stability of the issue of the Tatars. The problematic elements of the Islamic issue in Crimea include: religious tensions inside the Tatar community itself, the departures of Crimean volunteers to Syria, Russian policy towards the Tatars, especially towards Islamic fundamentalism, Tatars' reactions towards the above policy, and more widely, towards the Russian annexation of the peninsula.

Prior to Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014, the most problematic Islam-related aspect there were the religion-based conflicts within the Tatar community itself²⁸⁵. Contrary to Islamic radicalism, which appeared in Crimea on a marginal scale only with the war in Syria, extreme Islam had been present in Crimea since the 1990s in the form of two, at times inter-diffused, movements²⁸⁶: Salafists and Hizb ut-Tahrir (which in the contrary to the rest of the post-Soviet area, operated legally in Ukraine). Hizb ut-Tahrir was widespread, and its activities did not generate problems from the perspective of the state, nor did it cause serious conflicts within Crimea's Muslim community²⁸⁷.

²⁸⁴ According to the 2001 census - 243,000 people (12% of the peninsula's population): http://2001.ukrcensus.gov.ua/rus/results/nationality_population/nationality_popul1/select_51/?botton=cens_db&box=5.1W&k_t=01&p=50&rz=1_1&rz_b=2_1%20%20%20%20%20%20%20%20&n_page=3

²⁸⁵ In addition to this political conflicts also took place: for example the rivalry between the Mejlis and Milli Firka. Further in: Tadeusz A. Olszański, Crimean Tatars after Russia's annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, *OSW Commentary*, 30.06.2014, <http://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2014-07-02/crimean-tatars-after-russias-annexation-crimean-peninsula>.

²⁸⁶ A Salafist can be a member or sympathiser of Hizb ut-Tahrir, but that does not translate to every member of the Hizb ut-Tahrir being a Salafist.

²⁸⁷ Mejlis was not supportive of Hizb ut-Tahrir's growth, viewing it as a rival: <http://www.ng.ru/>

In the case of Salafism the situation was different. Its growth was met with resistance from the traditional, Hanafi clergy. Tensions existed also within the Salafi community itself, and mainly consisted of conflicts over the spheres of influence. At times even they even took the form of acts of violence (for example the clashes in the Zhuravki in 2009)²⁸⁸.

Despite this the Russian media did circulate information, unsupported by credible evidence, about the alarming scale of Islamic radicalism in the republic. The only actual occurrence of it is the limited departures to Syria. There is no data about the exact number of the Crimean Tatars fighting in the ranks of Islamic terrorist organisations in Syria, but estimates claim it is between several dozen and 150-200 people²⁸⁹. Amongst the post-Soviet Jihadists' leaders there was one Crimean Tatar – the former deputy of the commander of the Army of Emigrants and Supporters – Abdul Karim al-Krymi (alternatively – Abdul Karim al-Ukraini), whose real name is unknown (as is his past). Contrary to the other post-Soviet states, departures from Crimea for Syria took place on a limited scale and were not in the focus of the authorities' attention.

After Russia's annexation of the Crimea the key problem with regard to the Islamic issue is the Russian policy towards Islam (and Tatars in general), as well as the reactions of the Tatar community (especially of the fundamentalists and Salafists).

Moscow, and also the local occupation authorities dominated by Crimean Russians, has an aggressive policy towards the Crimean Tatars, whom it views as a threat to Russian control over the peninsula, and Ukraine's "fifth column". This has led to persecutions of the Tatar community, especially of the leaders of political and independent Muslim movements. Examples of such actions include raids on the Mejlis' headquarters²⁹⁰, abductions and arrests of individuals²⁹¹, and even the death in unclear circumstances of several Tatar activists, who were probably murdered by the new Russian authorities²⁹². Russian policy towards Hizb

cis/2013-10-07/1_crym.html and http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/field/field_document/20141111TransnationalIslamMunster.pdf

²⁸⁸ <http://focus.ua/society/64741/>

²⁸⁹ http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=41136&cHash=d873c9e97210acb9b505cdadb5ffd5b8 and <http://online.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702303795904579431290464167718>

²⁹⁰ <http://www.kyivpost.com/content/ukraine-abroad/radio-free-europeradio-liberty-crimean-tatar-mejlis-raided-searched-by-police-photos-364800.html>

²⁹¹ <http://www.khpg.org/pda/index.php?id=1414064636>

²⁹² <http://www.rferl.org/content/crimea-tatar-killing-ukraine-russia-annexation-minority/25301602.html>

ut-Tahrir is also noteworthy. The organisation operated legally in Ukraine, and enjoyed popular support amongst the Crimean Tatar community (exact data is lacking, but probably several thousand people were members). In Russia Hizb ut-Tahrir is listed as a terrorist organisation and membership is punishable by law. The Russian authorities, guided by their own legislation and ignoring the current situation of Tatars in Crimea, began a wide scale campaign of persecution against Hizb ut-Tahrir. The significance of this issue for Moscow can be seen in the decision to nominate general Viktor Palagan to the post of the chief of the Crimean FSB – Palagan is a former FSB chief in Bashkortostan and successfully combated Hizb ut-Tahrir in this region of the Russian Federation²⁹³.

The observed trends suggest that the Crimean Tatar community's reaction to the repression will firstly be emigration from Crimea – mainly to Ukraine, to a smaller extent to European Union states, and only in individual cases to the Middle East, including Syria. The establishment of Islamic militancy in Crimea seems highly unlikely. The reasons for this include:

- The level of Russian control and surveillance over the peninsula, which is treated as a priority by Moscow;
- The pacifist (rejecting armed struggle) character of Hizb ut-Tahrir;
- Crimean Tatars' realisation that they cannot count on actual external support – neither from the West, the Ukrainian government, nor Turkey (whose influence in Crimea is often overestimated, as is the significance of Crimea in its foreign policy).

This does not mean that Crimean Tatars will not undertake any armed struggle at all. However, as is currently the case, it will not take place in Crimea itself. The most radical Salafists will probably still join the ranks of militants in Syria²⁹⁴, while others will fight on the Ukrainian side in Donbas. An example of this stance can be the so-called “Crimea” battalion²⁹⁵, comprised mainly of

²⁹³ <http://vesti-ukr.com/krym/49106-glavoj-upravljenija-fsb-v-krymu-naznachen-byvs-hij-glavnyj-chekist-bashkirii>

²⁹⁴ Viewing this jihad as being more important than anti-Russian actions. One example of this stance is the statement of Abdul Karim al-Krymi, who called for jihad to be waged first of all in Syria: <http://www.akhbarshaam.info/2014/05/13/53/>

²⁹⁵ In reality a formation maximally in size of a company: <https://www.facebook.com/sotnja.krym> and <http://vk.com/rotakrym>

Crimean Tatars (including Salafists), who view the struggle against Russia not only as a patriotic, but also a religious duty²⁹⁶.

10. Volga region

The Volga region, mainly the republics of Tatarstan and Bashkortostan, is the second largest, after the Northern Caucasus, Islamic area inside the Russian Federation (7.9 million people, out of which 4.24 million – 53.7% – are Muslims, mostly Tatars and Bashirs²⁹⁷). The Islamic issue is not the biggest problem of the Volga region. Extremist Islamic currents and Islamic fundamentalism are present in there, mainly in form of the few, yet growing, Salafi communities (with the largest one being in the city of Naberezhnye Chelny in Tatarstan), and the Hizb ut-Tahrir party (which is illegal in Russia). Islamic fundamentalism, despite alarmist information in Russian local and nationwide media, is rather a marginal phenomenon. The potential superimposition of the Islamic issue on the socio-political problems in the Volga region (including calls for autonomy for Tatarstan), could lead to a destabilisation of the region, especially were there to be a serious political and economic crisis in Russia.

Salafism has developed in the Volga region since the 1990s but it has not gained the level of importance it has in other regions of the former USSR. Tatarstan witnessed tensions between the official Islamic clergy and the Salafists, and attacks even occurred. However, it is hard to determine whether they were caused by ideological or rather business/mafia-related conflicts. The assassination attempts on Tatarstan's mufti Ildus Faizov and his deputy Valiulla Yakupov in August 2012 may serve as examples of this²⁹⁸. These were initially blamed on members of the Salafi community²⁹⁹. A more realistic version was subsequently established, linking the attacks to criminal business disputes regarding the bribes for organising pilgrimages to Mecca (this is a common occurrence amongst the post-Soviet Islamic clergy)³⁰⁰. Hizb ut-Tahrir's network in the Volga region is relatively widespread (in comparison with, for example, the Northern Caucasus). This can be seen for example in the presence of the

²⁹⁶ Battalion "Crimea" statement: http://vk.com/rotakrym?z=photo-73502175_341494695%2Falbum-73502175_00%2Frev

²⁹⁷ 2010 census data, available at: http://www.gks.ru/free_doc/new_site/perepis2010/perepis_itogi1612.htm

²⁹⁸ As a result of which Yakupov died, and Faizov was seriously wounded.

²⁹⁹ <http://www.apn.ru/publications/article26923.htm>

³⁰⁰ <http://argumenti.ru/society/2012/07/191259>

group's symbols during mass Islamic celebrations. The organisation's activities are treated as a threat by local security structures. Frequent arrests and long prison sentences for its members are one of the results of their attentions³⁰¹.

Occurrences of Islamic radicalism in the Volga region are limited to several departures of radicalised Salafists to Afghanistan (for example Salman Bulgarsky) and Syria, as well as a few armed incidents in Tatarstan. Nevertheless, it is hard to unanimously link them to the activity of Islamic radicals. Such incidents include the above mentioned attacks on Tatarstan's muftis, the alleged establishment of a miniature clandestine militancy in 2012 in the form of one unit numbering several individuals (the only evidence for this was one video appeal uploaded to the Internet³⁰² and it could also have been a provocation by the security services), a shoot-out during an FSB operation in Kazan in October of 2012, as a result of which two Salafists suspected of militant activity and an FSB agent were killed³⁰³, and also a similar operation of the security services in Chistopole in May 2014 (two suspects were killed during it)³⁰⁴.

Despite of the fact that to date the Islam-related challenges in the Volga region has been limited in scale, the superimposition of the Islamic issue on other socio-political problems of the region may lead to it becoming more important (especially in Tatarstan). The most serious of the above problems include: ethnic tensions between Tatars and Russians³⁰⁵, the authoritarianism of the local authorities, and the complicated relationship between Tatarstan and the central government³⁰⁶. The superimposition of the Islamic problem, for example through the rise of the Islamic fundamentalism, onto currently existing challenges (for example the so-far controlled Tatar separatism) may in the long term perspective have a destabilising effect on the situation in this region.

³⁰¹ For example: <http://www.tatar-inform.ru/news/2014/10/15/426699/>, also the organisation itself views Tatarstan as a difficult region for its operations (as it has previously viewed Uzbekistan: http://www.hizb-ut-tahrir.org/PDF/EN/en_lflts_pdf/2014_01_28_Russia_EN.pdf

³⁰² https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=BHo_CVDy8oQ#

³⁰³ <http://www.gazeta.ru/social/2012/10/24/4823553.shtml>

³⁰⁴ <http://kazanfirst.ru/feed/20472>

³⁰⁵ http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=42402&cHash=86821ff6fcb447555e1d548ef9a50c2a

³⁰⁶ Further in: Jadwiga Rogoza, Federation without federalism. Relations between Moscow and the regions, *OSW Study*, April of 2014, <http://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-studies/2014-05-07/federation-without-federalism-relations-between-moscow-and-regions>

11. Other regions

Islam, including its fundamentalist currents, is also present in the other regions of the post-Soviet area, yet not in a concentrated and historically uninterrupted manner as in those described above. In any such list it is important to mention Moscow and Saint Petersburg which, due to influx of labour migrants from Central Asia and Azerbaijan, as well as internal migration from the Northern Caucasus, are becoming centres of Islamic life. In these cities not only do the various Islamic currents present on the post-Soviet areas clash with each other, but their followers from the entire region themselves also have a chance to interact. Between two to even five million Muslims live and work in Moscow alone³⁰⁷. On the one hand this causes positive conditions for the growth of Islamic religious and intellectual life (numerous Islamic organisations and publishing houses operate there) and, on the other, it generates a wide range of tensions linked to the ethnic Russian population's dislike of Muslims³⁰⁸, as well as institutional and infrastructural limitations (for example there are only four mosques in operation in Moscow, with the construction of a new one regularly postponed³⁰⁹). Additionally, this concentration of Muslims creates a breeding ground for the spread of radical and fundamentalist ideas. Moscow is currently not only a target of occasional attacks by radical Islamic terrorists from the Northern Caucasus, but is also one of the logistical centres for the departures to Syria and Iraq. It is in Moscow, due to the availability of the ideology and the scale of the problems that labour migrants face, that the process of radicalising volunteers leaving for jihad takes place³¹⁰.

In other regions of the Russian Federation, mainly due to the presence of labour migrants from Central Asia, similar processes take place on a smaller scale – the role of Islam is also increasing there. Salafi communities are in operation

³⁰⁷ <http://inosmi.ru/russia/20121101/201651752.html> and <http://www.interfax-religion.ru/?act=news&div=37816>

³⁰⁸ <http://www.hrw.org/news/2014/01/16/russia-letter-un-special-rapporteur-human-rights-migrants-and-un-independent-expert->

³⁰⁹ <http://izvestia.ru/news/533219>

³¹⁰ This is noticed even by the governments of the Central Asian states. Even prior to the civil war in Syria, labour migrants from Central Asia became radicalised in Moscow and later joined the ranks of the IMU and IJU in Pakistan and Afghanistan: <http://www.avesta.tj/security/29158-put-tadzhikskoy-molodezhi-v-siriyu-prolegaet-cherez-prospekt-mira.html> and statements of the IMU members – http://www.jundurrahmon.com/jundulloh_filmlar/ali_mergan_russian.avi

and the process of radicalisation takes place there³¹¹. It is true mostly of the European part of Russia, as well as western and central Siberia, where anywhere from several dozen to several hundreds of thousands of labour migrants from the Central Asian states live and work³¹². Small Salafi communities also exist in the other countries of the former USSR, in which Islam traditionally did not play an important role – for example in Belarus³¹³.

One noteworthy phenomenon is that Russians and members of other traditionally non-Muslim ethnicities present in Russia occasionally convert to Islam. This process began in the late 1980s-early 1990s, during the fall of the USSR and the collapse of the Soviet model of society, and it has intensified in the recent years. According to the converts themselves, Islam is a solution for all the social problems present in Russia, such as alcoholism, drug abuse, the crisis of the family etc.³¹⁴ It is hard to pin down the exact scale of the phenomenon – the most probable estimates hold it to be at a level of 3,000 people³¹⁵. The most well-known example of a Russian convert to Islam is Said Buryatsky (Aleksandr Tikhomirov) – ethnically half Russian, half Buryat, he converted to Islam, became one of the most influential leaders of the peaceful Salafists, and then joined the ranks of the Caucasus Emirate and was killed in a clash with Russian forces in 2010 in Ingushetia.

Considering the dynamic growth of Islam in general and Salafism in particular which has taken place during the last quarter of a century on the post-Soviet area, it seems prudent to suppose that there will be an increase in the number of regions where the Islamic issue, including radicalism and fundamentalism, is present in the socio-political life.

³¹¹ For example: http://irkutsk.rusplt.ru/index/zachem_v_irkutske_otkryvayutsya_kursy_arabskogo_yazyka_i_osnov_islama-15201.html i http://www.ng.ru/ng_religii/2015-02-04/4_siberia.html

³¹² More on the Central Asian labour migrants in Siberia: Piotr Varnavski, *Iz Azii v Sibir, ili v poiskakh „novogo sveta”* (polozheniye migrantov iz Tsentralnoy Azii v Baykalskoy Sibiri), Ulan Ude 2013.

³¹³ Peaceful Salafi community with followers in the dozens, suffering from continuous repressions from the Belarusian authorities: <http://news.tut.by/society/432820.html> and <http://charter97.org/ru/news/2015/1/11/134768/>

³¹⁴ The Russian nationalist Aleksandr Kovtun provides an example of this. He conducted a series of attacks in 2010 in the Primorsky Krai (Russian Far East). While in prison he converted to Islam, concluding that Islam is the solution to the problems of Russian society, such as alcoholism, drug abuse, or prostitution: <http://www.aif.ru/incidents/18598>, and <http://ummanews.com/minbar/9148--l-r.html>.

³¹⁵ <http://www.interfax-religion.ru/?act=news&div=17618>

CONCLUSIONS

The phenomenon of post-Soviet militants in Syria, due to its media potential and attractiveness, is a popular subject amongst journalists and analysts from both the post-Soviet area and the West. This is the case also because of the political usefulness of the issue, which is commonly exploited by the authorities of the particular states both in internal power struggles and on the international arena. This leads to the problem being blown out of proportion and generates alarmist forecasts regarding the influence of the above phenomenon on the post-Soviet states. A similar mechanism is in place also in the case of militant Islam, Islamic fundamentalism, and even Islam in general in the former USSR, the role of which is often overestimated.

This does not mean that the problem of war migration or Islamic fundamentalism in the post-Soviet area should be ignored or played down. The influence and role of Islam are without a doubt on the rise there, and under appropriate circumstances, it actually may play an important role in shaping the political situation there (including the security sphere), both by itself and as a result of it being instrumentalised in political power plays.

Nevertheless, in order to properly judge the meaning of the Islamic issue and the phenomenon of radical Islam in the post-Soviet states, one should ascribe the proper proportions to them – place them in the social, economic and political context present there. Islam in the post-Soviet area, even in such places as Dagestan or the Fergana Valley, does not function in a vacuum. Furthermore, the experiences of the last twenty five years show that militant Islam was almost always a secondary factor, one step behind the socio-political processes and events—not generating them, but rather reacting to them. Therefore the analysis of Islam’s role, as well as the current and future consequences of the war migration to Syria and Iraq, must be rooted in the political logic of the particular states and region as a whole.

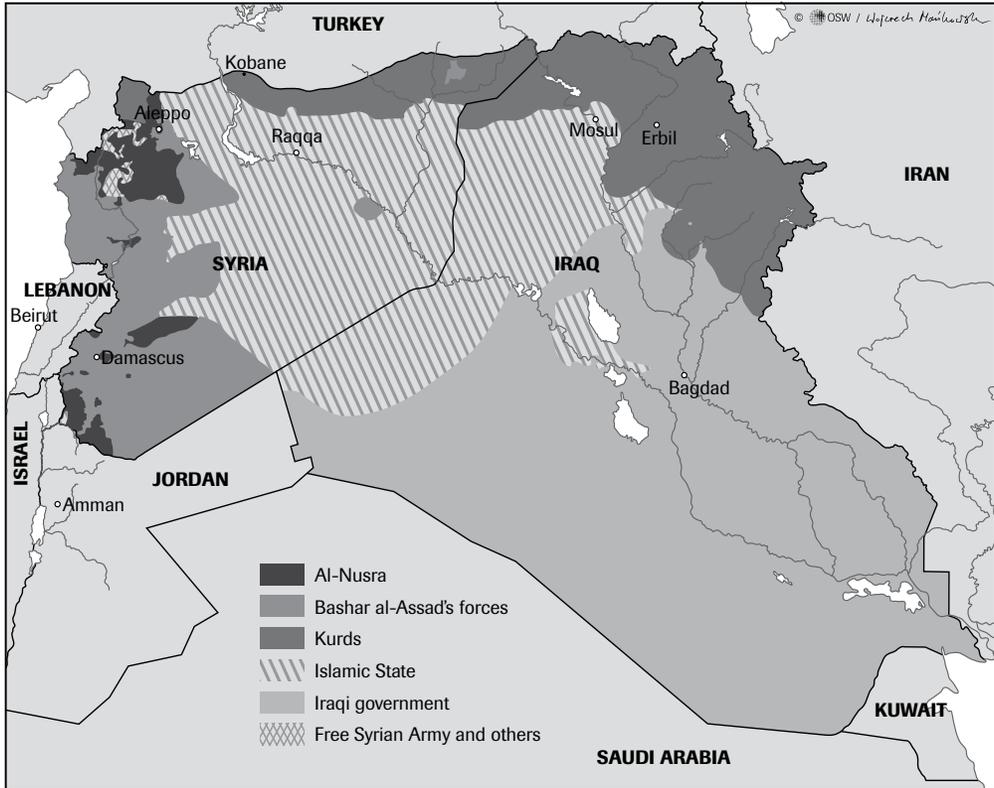
All evidence shows that the war migration of citizens of the post-Soviet states, as is the case with Islamic fundamentalism and militant Islam, has become a permanent element of the religious, social and political landscape of the former USSR states inhabited by Muslims. This does not mean, though, that the Central Asian states, Azerbaijan or the Northern Caucasus should be viewed in the context of Islamic civilisation, in which religion plays an incomparably higher role in the socio-political processes. While in many cases *Homo sovieticus* did in fact become *Homo jihadicus*, the inhabitants of the states formed on

the rubble of the USSR are still under a strong influence of the Soviet heritage and Russia's influence in the civilizational sphere. A change in the current situation – if it ever takes place – requires not only a transition of multiple generations, but also colossal geopolitical and civilisational landslides. While these cannot be ruled out, nor can they currently be predicted. The post-Soviet Muslims and the regions they inhabit, in the mental and civilizational dimensions, still remain halfway between the Islamic and the Soviet/Russian worlds.

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The text was closed in June 2015

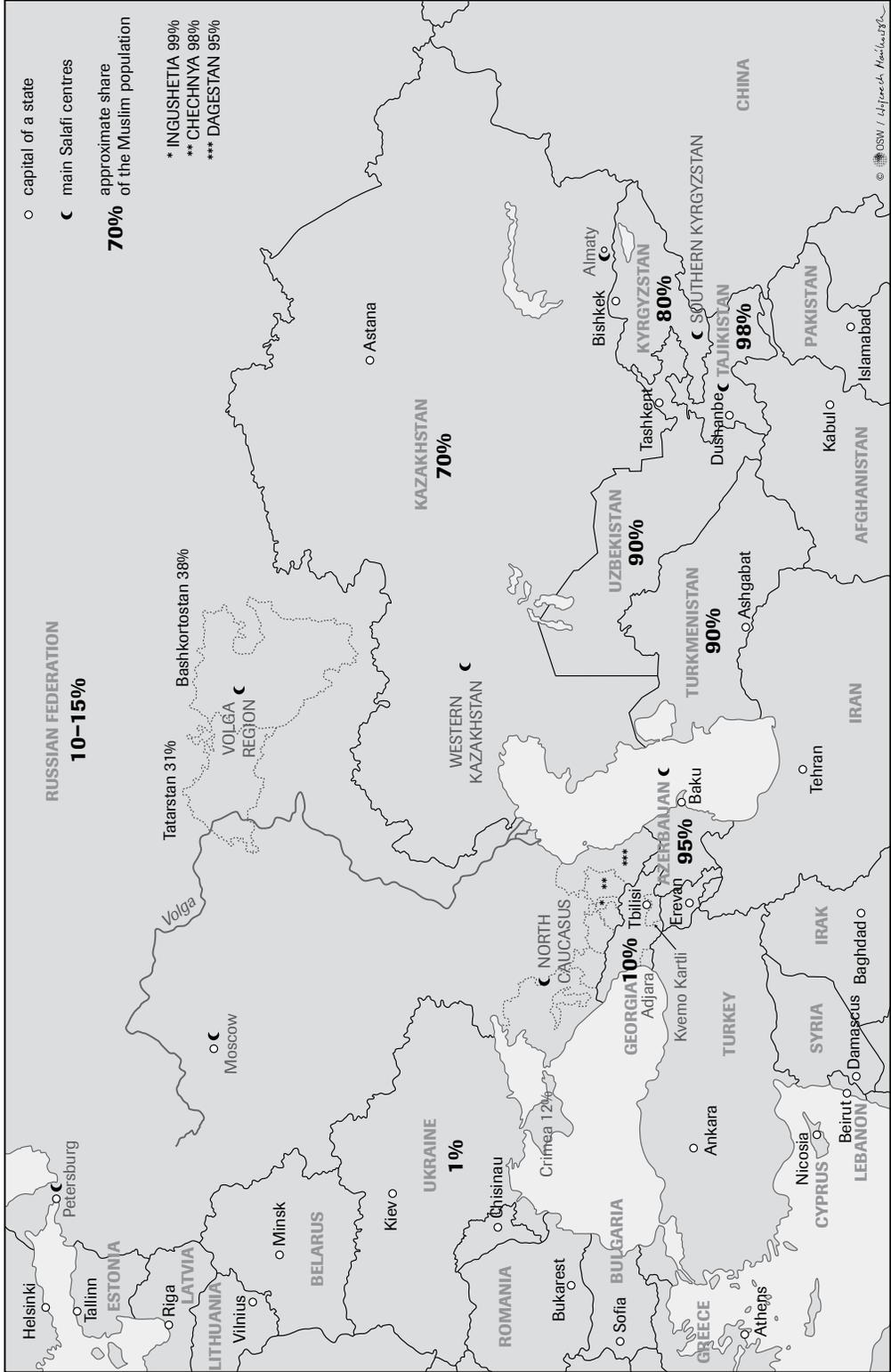
Map 1. Situation in Syria and Iraq



Map 2. Islam in the Caucasus



Map 3. Islam in the post-Soviet area



Map 4. Approximate number of volunteers

