

---

# THE FOREIGN FIGHTER FACTOR

*How terror groups exert influence in the North Caucasus*

---

BY DARYA NICOLSON

---



Russian soldiers patrol the Old City of Aleppo, Syria, in January 2017. Russia is allied with the regime of Syrian leader Bashar Assad. REUTERS



**“ WE ARE ASHAMED THAT WE ARE GOING TO SYRIA AT A TIME WHEN THE CAUCASUS IS STILL OCCUPIED, BUT YOUNG PEOPLE ARE RETURNING HERE ONCE THEY’VE UNDERGONE A TRAINING COURSE.**

*~ A BBC source close to Chechen militants*

In September 2014, the United Nations Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 2178 concerning the “acute and growing” threat posed by foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs). These are defined as “individuals who travel to a State other than their States of residence or nationality for the purpose of the perpetration, planning, or preparation of, or participation in, terrorist acts or the providing or receiving of terrorist training, including in connection with armed conflict.” FTFs affect the dynamic of conflict — its intractability, duration and intensity, and furthermore pose a threat to their “States of origin, transit, destination, and neighboring zones of armed conflict in which they are active,” according to the resolution.

Since the eruption of the civil war in Syria, and especially after the June 2014 proclamation of the Islamic State (IS) “caliphate,” thousands of aspiring fighters from different regions have traveled to Iraq and Syria to join the IS or other violent extremist groups, according to Global Coalition’s article,

“Foreign Terrorist Fighters — Trends and Dynamics.” In December 2015, The Soufan Group reported the number of foreign fighters in Syria had reached approximately 30,000 from more than 100 countries. That year, the top three FTF nationalities were Tunisian (6,000), Saudi Arabian (2,500) and Russian (2,300), while there were approximately 4,700 fighters from the former Soviet republics. In October 2015, Russian President Vladimir Putin stated that 5,000 to 7,000 fighters from Russia and the former Soviet Union had traveled to Syria to join the IS. Most of these fighters are from the North Caucasus (Chechnya and Dagestan), with others from Azerbaijan and Georgia as well as Central Asia — Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Together they share not only the ability to speak Russian, but also a heritage of grievances stemming from the Afghan-Soviet and the post-Soviet conflicts. The phenomenon of North Caucasian FTFs

Checken refugees in Turkey protest Russian President Vladimir Putin during a 2014 visit to Istanbul. The signs read, “Russia, get out of the Caucasus!”

AFP/GETTY IMAGES



Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov attends Russia's annual Defenders of the Fatherland Day celebrations on December 12, 2016, in Grozny. Radicalized Chechens have fought for the Islamic State in large numbers. THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

has security implications in the North Caucasus, the Russian Federation and worldwide.

Today, there are fewer FTFs in Syria and Iraq because of battlefield losses and the decreased flow of foreign fighters to the conflict. Interpol estimated that there were 15,000 FTFs in the region in 2016. Among other factors, the reduction in FTFs is attributed to increased controls put in place by U.N. members, military pressure and the IS' financial decline. The loss of territory and revenue has caused increasing desertion rates, recruitment difficulties and more internal corruption and theft. FTFs are suffering from low morale, according to Paul Wood's January 2016 article for *The Spectator*. Many of its fighters "are packing it in" and "want to defect." And it's not only the restricted inflow of FTFs that has dropped manpower numbers, but also the reverse flow — FTFs returning home or moving on to a third state. By December 2016, approximately 30 percent of European FTFs were thought to have returned to their home countries, Tanya Mehra wrote in her December 2016 paper for the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism.

Therefore, the relatively high number of North Caucasian FTFs involved in the conflict is a matter of concern. Will these FTFs return home with peaceful purposes or malicious intentions? Will they choose to stay in the conflict area and perhaps join other terrorist organizations as the IS comes under increasing pressure, or will they move to a third state, relocate and participate in a different conflict? Terrorism scholars Colin P. Clarke and Amarnath Amarasingham consider several options in their March 2017 article for *The Atlantic*: The IS' hardcore FTFs may stay in Syria and Iraq, or some could join an underground resistance of an "ISIS 2.0," which may with time

form a covert terrorist organization. Others may change group allegiances on the ground and eventually seek rapprochement with al-Qaida. Other FTFs, who are prevented from traveling to their countries of origin — the independent or "free agents" — could form "a cohort of stateless jihadists" and travel to a third state. Finally, the FTFs who return to their home countries could be either the "disillusioned," the "disengaged but not disillusioned" or the "operational."

North Caucasian FTFs are members of the highly fractured opposition to the Syrian government. The majority are in IS ranks, others are with al-Nusrah, and the rest are part of numerous other factions. Many of the North Caucasian FTFs have previous combat experience — perhaps in Afghanistan, Georgia, Chechnya or Dagestan — and have reputations as fierce fighters. In fact, Chechen fighters (and North Caucasians, generally) seem to be perceived as elite fighters, worthy of respect, according to the blog "From Chechnya to Syria" by Joanna Paraszczuk.

Considering the large number of people involved, as well as the history of conflict in the region, North Caucasian FTFs are likely to constitute a long-term security threat. It is also important to examine their motivations for fighting, the factions/organizations that they fight for, the extent to which they are influenced by pro-jihadist propaganda and additional characteristics such as previous combat experience and ties to other terrorist organizations.

## MOTIVATIONS TO FIGHT IN SYRIA

The motivations of North Caucasian FTFs are varied, just as they are for those from other regions. However, an important motivation for this group, Dmitry Shlapentokh notes in his

February 2015 *Middle East Insights* article, is that the civil war in Syria provides an alternative battleground for fighting the Russian state. The conflict in the North Caucasus, especially in Chechnya, has a long history revolving around gaining independence from Russia. This fight can be traced back to Imperial Russia and includes the two more recent, bloody Russo-Chechen wars, as well as instability in the region. The protracted state of conflict (and official attempts at its normalization) produced grave societal issues and left a heritage of immense grievances. These are fuel for the North Caucasian resistance — for militants and extremists. However, the insurgents' ability to continue fighting has been severely limited. In Chechnya, this is due to the pro-Kremlin government under former rebel Ramzan Kadyrov. The inability to continue fighting in the North Caucasus, in combination with Moscow's support of the Assad regime, serve as push factors to join the fight in Syria.

Religion is another prominent motivational factor, writes Emil Souleimanov in his 2014 paper for *Middle East Journal*. Just as during the Chechen/Dagestani/Ingush resistance, when religion served as a force to attract foreign fighters to Chechnya, religion has been used as a unifying force by North Caucasians fighting in Syria. According to Shlapentokh, many young men have been drawn to join the Syrian jihad because they regard the Alawite (a heterodox sect of Shia Islam) Assad regime as not truly Muslim and because the Syrian regime is perceived as Russia's key ally in the Middle East. Souleimanov goes further, explaining that it is not only an opportunity for jihad, but also a duty of Russian-speaking Muslims to join their oppressed brothers in Syria. Most North Caucasian FTFs are Salafist. Others exhibit Sunni solidarity in response to images and propaganda of Sunni Muslims injured, tortured or killed by the "infidel" Alawi regime. Therefore, the battleground in Syria presents North Caucasian FTFs with the chance to fight both the Russian government and its interests, and the enemies of Islam worldwide.

Furthermore, by participating in the Syrian civil war, inexperienced FTFs gain combat experience and establish connections that enable them to engage in domestic insurgency or terrorist activities upon their return home. In addition, participation in the conflict may offer an opportunity for identity reconstruction, stepping out of a life of poverty and unemployment to one fighting for "a brotherhood in arms" and a "noble" cause.

North Caucasian fighters can be divided into two waves, Jean-Francois Ratelle argues in a 2016 paper for *Caucasus Survey*. The first wave traveled to Syria in 2011-2013 because they were unable to fight at home, and the second wave came in 2014-2017 because they openly decided not to fight in the

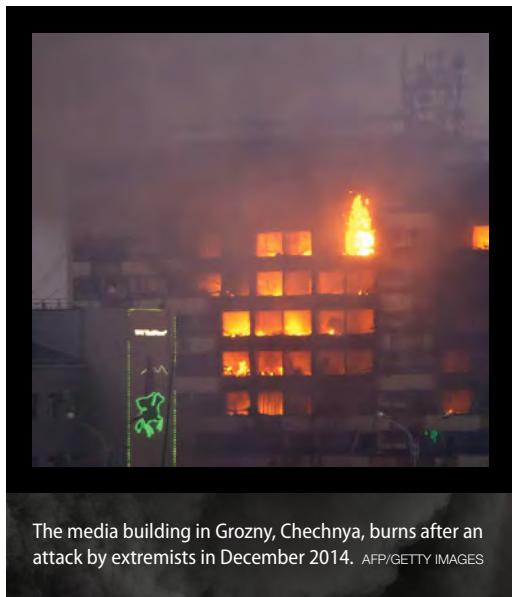
North Caucasus but "to join an international jihadist front." The contest between the *Imarat Kavkaz* (Caucasus Emirate, or CE) and the IS in some ways shaped the dispersion of North Caucasian FTFs on the battlefield. The gradual decline of the CE also made space for the IS in the North Caucasus, which can to some extent explain this dynamic.

In a July 2016 entry on the "From Chechnya to Syria" blog, Paraszczuk shows that an initial group of North Caucasians (about 15-17) became active in Syria around 2012. Throughout the conflict, the numbers of fighters from the North Caucasus, and the rest of Russia and the former Soviet Union, rose to 5,000-7,000. Why they fight has been discussed, but for which groups do they fight? The fighters can generally be classified as IS-allied or al-Nusra-allied (i.e., al-Qaeda). However, the dynamic is complicated; throughout the conflict factions have switched alliances due to intra-factional dynamics, developments within the CE, and the changing relationship between the IS and al-Nusra, although most North Caucasian fighters were drawn to the IS in part by very effective propaganda.

## SECURITY IMPLICATIONS

The rate of FTFs coming into Syria has decreased because of increased border controls and high casualties among militant groups, among other factors. Fighters that traveled to Syria and Iraq at the beginning of the conflict, for the most part, could not return to the North Caucasus to fight against the Russian government. Typically, these were fighters with combat experience who were known to authorities. These fighters paved the way for others by establishing "independent" factions just as Abdul Hakim Shishani and Muslim Shishani did, factions affiliated with the CE or those that later split and were shaped by the IS/al-Nusra rivalry.

Regardless of which faction they joined, these fighters may pose a serious security threat not only to Russia, but also to neighboring countries and future conflict zones. The combat experience gained and/or refined, training received, networks established and reputations built add to their "danger value," and therefore to their ability to mobilize new recruits. Furthermore, a dangerous new trend may have been set on the Syrian battlefield by the emergence of Malhama Tactical, a private jihadist military contractor that provides training and battlefield consulting for al-Nusra. Some of the independent factions have a stronger political agenda, which may increase their fighters' desire to return, posing a greater danger for the Caucasus. The influence of the war in Syria and, specifically, the ideological reach of the IS into the North Caucasus is a growing concern, despite the heavy security presence in the region.



The media building in Grozny, Chechnya, burns after an attack by extremists in December 2014. AFP/GETTY IMAGES

## INSTABILITY IN THE NORTH CAUCASUS

In the fight against insurgency and terrorism in the North Caucasus, there are three central actors: the *siloviki* (security forces/law enforcement), the *boeviki* (fighters) — also sometimes known as *lesniye* (“from the woods” where they hide) — and the *peregovorshik* (the negotiator between law enforcement and militants). The latter is a peacemaker of sorts, who “brings people out of the woods” and negotiates between the police and militants. According to Elena Milashina of the Russian newspaper *Novaya Gazeta*, this is how the authorities know who left Russia to fight in Syria. Furthermore, they “are not worried about those who leave; they are worried about those who may return.”

It is difficult to find official updated statistics concerning the number of returned fighters or the number of terrorist plots or attacks committed by fighters affiliated with the IS. According to estimates, 15–20 percent of fighters (as many as 889) returned to the North Caucasus in 2015. There is not much concrete information in the public domain about counterterrorist measures, operations and progress. According to Alexander Bortnikov, director of the Russian Federal Security Service, 30 terrorist attacks were successfully averted in 2015, and 770 “bandits” and their accomplices were put on trial. In 2016, 42 attacks were averted. Among those tried were defendants charged with terror financing, recruiting new members and leaving the country with the aim of fighting abroad.

According to the Kavkazsky Uzel website, which provides a chronology of events in the North Caucasus, *siloviki-boeviki* fighting has intensified. In 2016, there were 84 armed clashes, 23 explosions, seven terrorist attacks and 287 casualties. By contrast, in 2015 there were 87 armed clashes, 11 explosions, six terrorist attacks and 258 casualties. The efficacy of *boeviki* attacks has also grown. In 2015, for every 10 *siloviki* killed, the *boeviki* would lose 35 in an attack. However, in 2016 the *boeviki* lost only 17 men for every 10 *siloviki* killed during an attack. Siloviki failures and fighters returning from Syria have contributed to the escalating situation in Chechnya. As a result of clashes and counterterrorism operations (CTOs) in 2016, 162 *boeviki* were killed (including 22 leaders of the “bandit” underground) and four wounded. These numbers have decreased for the past three years, with 174 killed in 2015 and 249 in 2014. In early 2017, 17 militants were killed in Chechnya and eight in Dagestan. There were 97 law enforcement casualties (32 killed; 65 wounded) in 2016, which is nearly double the number in 2015 (49). Since 2015, in Chechnya alone there have been at least 10 assaults on the *siloviki* (three in 2017, four in 2016 and three in 2015).

Attacks also took place elsewhere in the North Caucasus — in Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria and Dagestan — and the IS is increasingly claiming responsibility. In August 2016, the IS released a video calling for jihad in Russia; however, Chechen leader Kadyrov did not take it seriously, stating that IS *boeviki* have neither the required power nor the capabilities. Nevertheless, back in 2015 the IS took responsibility for its first attacks in the North Caucasus, an assault on the Russian Army barracks in southern Dagestan and a shooting in Derbent. Some of the *boeviki* were fighters who had returned from

Syria. In 2016, there were another five IS-linked attacks in Dagestan and one in Chechnya, and by early 2017 the IS had been linked to at least four attacks, including an assault on a National Guard checkpoint in late March and two clashes with jihadists in Chechnya. The attack that took place in March 2017 may be tied to a video released on YouTube a few days earlier by the “Council of the military jamaat Ichkeria.” It allegedly depicts some of the returned fighters who were part of the Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar (JMA), one of the Chechen-led militant groups based in Syria, according to Russian news agency RIA Novosti’s Dagestan website.

The terrorist attack in St. Petersburg, on April 3, 2017 — a bombing in the metro that killed 16 and left 102 injured — was the first of such a scale since 2013. The suspected suicide bomber was reportedly an ethnic Uzbek born in the Kyrgyz Republic. He had obtained Russian citizenship in 2011 and had been living and working in St. Petersburg. According to the Russian media group RBC, he was deported from Turkey in December 2016. Katiba al-Imam Shamil, an al-Qaida-linked group in Syria, claimed responsibility for the attack, according to the SITE Intelligence Group. The perpetrator may have been tied to one of the leaders of the CE in Kabardino-Balkaria, who, according to Russia’s National Antiterrorist Committee, had been eliminated with four other prominent members during a CTO in St. Petersburg in August 2016.

However, the attacks for which the IS has claimed responsibility were not necessarily carried out by fighters who had returned from Syria or Iraq. The IS has spread to the North Caucasus, and many young people influenced by IS propaganda and the conditions in the region become radicalized without going abroad to fight. The word “*boeviki*” does not distinguish the affiliation of the militant (CE, IS or other) and is used synonymously with “terrorist.” The CE barely exists anymore, due to the CTOs carried out in 2016 by government forces, and the IS has stepped in to fill the void. At least one attack in Chechnya can be tied to fighters who had returned from Syria and used to be part of JMA, and another attack in Dagestan has been linked to a fighter who had returned from Syria.

## COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY

Over the past three years, Russian counterterrorism and public security legislation have been supplemented with the Yarovaya laws. They broaden terrorism crimes to include criminal responsibility for failing to report crimes related to terror and for committing international terrorism. Moreover, they define data storage regulations for telecommunications and internet providers, and ban extremist activity. The penalties can include life in prison. Some of the laws are the subject of debate over their constitutionality.

The North Caucasus, however, lives according to slightly different laws. How local North Caucasian authorities deal with returned fighters is shrouded in secrecy. Legally, regional approaches draw on Russian counterterrorism legislation (the Federal Criminal Laws of the Russian Federation and other anti-terrorist laws), and security services conduct regular CTOs.

Of particular interest, however, is the concept of collective responsibility and other measures aimed at the general public. The principle of collective responsibility is regarded negatively since it holds responsible a group of innocent people not affiliated with the crime. It is employed in Chechnya to control and repress the population. Through this method — combined with Kadyrov's visits to various Middle Eastern states and the financing of mosques and schools — the Chechen government's influence is increasingly felt by the Chechen diaspora inside and outside of Russia, according to a 2016 report by the news website Kavkazsky Uzel. According to human rights advocates, Chechen refugees never forget that they have relatives in Chechnya who can be pressured into forcing them to return.

The main motivations for invoking collective responsibility are counterterrorism, countering extremism and radicalism, and fighting the insurgency. One of the anti-terrorist Yarovaya laws increases criminal responsibility for terror-related crimes (for those over the age of 14), including the withholding of information about a terrorist action (completed or in progress). The maximum penalty for withholding information is imprisonment for one year. While it is not applicable to spouses and close relatives, they can be held financially responsible for damages inflicted in a terrorist attack. Russian criminal law does not support collective responsibility. Nevertheless, the Russian federal government typically ignores Kadyrov's application of collective responsibility in Chechnya and the rest of the North Caucasus. Kadyrov says the families of militants guilty of crimes will be ousted from the republic and their houses demolished, and he is now pushing to legislate collective responsibility on the federal level, according to human rights advocate Oleg Orlov.

Collective responsibility is not only the preferred official strategy in Chechnya, it is seemingly supported by ordinary citizens (out of fear of the authorities or otherwise) — on various talk shows one might now hear that it is the norm, although only a couple of years ago it was considered barbaric. In December 2016 and January 2017, in response to attacks in Dagestan and Chechnya, government forces carried out mass detentions and questioned relatives and friends of the killed militants. The relatives of militants involved in the attacks in December were fired from their jobs, and their pensions and social subsidies were not paid, according to the author Maaz Bilalov. After the January attacks on Chechen police and the National Guard, some of the militants' relatives endured public penance, sometimes through local television, and were forced to leave their homes in Chechnya, noted Kazbek Chanturiya in a January 2017 post on Open Caucasus Media.

In January 2017, a protest against the IS and its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was held in the Chechen capital, Grozny, attended by approximately 2,000 mostly ordinary citizens. Among the speakers were mothers of militants who had joined or were planning to join the IS and who publicly asked for forgiveness for their sons' crimes. Parental responsibility was also discussed; it was agreed that parents should use harsher methods to improve the upbringing of their children. Former fighter Said Mazhaev, who turned himself in upon his return from Syria and had his initial sentence pardoned

in return for working with youth and participating in anti-IS counternarratives, spoke about the dangers of the IS (he had fought for JMA). Reportedly, he managed to convince some not to join the IS, yet his younger brother was involved in an attack in Grozny in December 2016. Other public events such as town meetings, frequently held after an attack or clash takes place, serve as platforms for discussing strategies like collective responsibility.

Such demonstrations aim to provoke fear in the population by showing that there will be consequences for involvement in terrorism, including for relatives. Local authorities and Russian special services have used collective responsibility against insurgency in the past. This frequently involves disappearances, questioning, beatings and torture. It sometimes also involves the use of relatives as human shields to persuade a militant to "come out of the forest," or cross over to the side of the government. Even though collective responsibility is ineffective at addressing the root causes of underlying social problems (and in fact, it fuels them), the Chechen authorities consider it to be a successful strategy.

## CONCLUSION

These approaches to countering terrorism and extremism in the North Caucasus feed into already existing social instability, grievances and discontent with authorities in the region. The Russian government should develop more soft approaches to counterterrorism. Years of CTOs and counterterrorist strategies — including collective responsibility — have decimated the CE to where it is barely functional; however, this is also due to the increasing influence of the IS in the region. IS propaganda successfully targets North Caucasian (and by extension, Russian) youth, agitating them to seek jihad within Russia or outside its borders. The number of FTFs from Russia and other post-Soviet states, even though currently decreasing, is substantial, and Russian security forces may have contributed to the outflow of fighters in the past. Even though the number of fighters returning from Syria is not known precisely, it could be 15-20 percent. Those that have returned are being prosecuted and incarcerated or have joined underground networks, while the whereabouts of others are unknown.

The number of IS-influenced attacks in the North Caucasus has grown, and some of the recent attacks in the region are linked to ex-JMA fighters and other returnees from Syria. The remaining fighters in Syria and Iraq, and those who still seek to join them on the battlefield, pose a threat not only to Russia, but also to neighboring countries. With current developments in Syria and the deteriorating situation and repression in Chechnya and neighboring republics, the threat grows stronger. The first wave of North Caucasian FTFs are potentially more dangerous, having gained skills and experience and built reputations and connections on the battlefield. The second wave of fighters was mostly influenced by IS propaganda, which remains influential in the region despite IS setbacks in Syria and Iraq. Regardless of their affiliation, North Caucasian FTFs pose a long-term threat to global security. Given the opportunity, they will likely fight in the Caucasus, but if unable to return home, they may be motivated to strike elsewhere. □