

The threat of the Islamic State to Russia's North Caucasus and Central Asia

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The emergence of the Islamic State (IS) in the Middle East has contributed to lowering tensions in the Russian North Caucasus as militants have left to fight in Syria. However, this may only be a temporary lull. The increasing power of attraction that the IS holds for jihadists not only in the North Caucasus but also in Central Asia is evolving into a serious challenge for Russia. Central Asian security is to a large extent dependent on Russian support and both Russia and the Central Asian states have previously had problems in handling the threat from militant jihadism.

The developments in the North Caucasus and Central Asia are intertwined. For example, Central Asian jihadists are recruited to the IS by North Caucasians while working in Russia. The Russian language is the lingua franca in the region and this enables recruitment. The IS even maintains a Russian-language media wing in order to spread its propaganda among Russian-speakers.

Reportedly there are several North Caucasians – predominantly Chechens – with influential positions within the IS command structure that lead units of solely Russian-speaking jihadists. There are few Central Asians equally high up in the hierarchy. This indicates that the will to fight for the caliphate is further developed or has existed longer in the North Caucasus.

The root causes of radicalisation in the North Caucasus and Central Asia are similar. Socio-economic problems feed radicalisation, and this is often used as a pretext for the governments to impose strict measures that in turn fuel further radicalisation. This vicious circle indicates that the governments concerned, including Russia's, are not well equipped to handle the challenge from the IS. The organisation has proved skillful in exploiting signs of societal discord to its own benefit. Although the North Caucasus is still a net beneficiary from the Russian state budget, the region's share in the state budget has been reduced drastically in favour of the Kremlin's geopolitical project in Crimea.

Although the level of violence in the North Caucasus has actually decreased as a result of the Syrian war, it is

unrealistic to believe that this will continue indefinitely. On 23 June 2015, the IS announced the creation of a new Wilayat Qawqaz (Caucasus governorate) after several senior militants in the area had pledged allegiance to the organisation. The problems of radicalisation and radical violence in the North Caucasus are going to persist. When the North Caucasian jihadists return from Syria and Iraq, they will most likely want to make Wilayat Qawqaz a governorate not just in name but also in reality.

The idea of radical Sharia rule or the use of extreme violence is not new to the North Caucasus. The Caucasus Emirate was set up in October 2007 in order to establish an emirate under Sharia law and to wage global Jihad. Between 2009 and 2014, the Caucasus Emirate claimed responsibility for several attacks and suicide bombings in the North Caucasus and major cities of Russia. From December 2014, however, middle-level commanders of the Caucasus Emirate began publicly switching their allegiance from Emirate leader Aliaskhab Kebekov to the IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, following al-Baghdadi's declaration of the Islamic Caliphate in parts of Syria and Iraq earlier in the year.

The North Caucasus is a severely neglected and underdeveloped part of Russia where corruption is rampant, unemployment high and the quality of education poor. Many people turn to religious authorities when the state fails to provide public services. In short, the driving forces behind radicalism in the region are multifaceted, but the Russian government has chosen counterinsurgency as the primary tool to deal with the issue. This approach is problematic because it feeds more violence and discontent.

The IS declaration of a new Wilayat will probably trigger a Russian response of increasing counterterrorism operations in the North Caucasus. The Russian government enhanced its domestic security efforts in the region following the clashes in the Chechen capital of Grozny in late 2014, when dozens of Russian policemen, insurgents and civilians were killed or



The North Caucasus (Map by Per Wikström, FOI)

injured after insurgents had occupied several central buildings of the city. In April 2015, Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov claimed that the IS was “Russia’s greatest enemy”, notwithstanding the strained relations with the United States over Russia’s involvement in the war in Ukraine. At least since September 2014 the IS has indeed threatened Russia. The IS sees Russia as its enemy due to Russia’s policies towards and actions in the North Caucasus region as well as for its long-time support of the Assad regime in Syria.

The looming security threat for Russia is the increasing numbers – estimated at several hundred or even thousands – of Russian citizens from the North Caucasus (Chechen, Dagestani, Ingush, Kabardins, etc.) and other predominantly Muslim regions of the Russian Federation such as Tatarstan and Bashkortostan who have joined the IS and are fighting in Syria and Iraq. Sooner or later, these fighters will come home and may share their military expertise with fighters in their homeland.

The Islamic State’s ability to attract followers in Central Asia via Russia illustrates how closely connected these countries are in security matters. Nikolai Bordyuzha, the head of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), of which Russia and

several of the Central Asian states are members, has said that security in Central Asia is deteriorating due to developments in Afghanistan and the rise of the IS.

Radical Islamism is a sensitive issue in Central Asia that has been securitised by all the governments in the region, particularly in connection with the Afghanistan conflict. This has led to a wide range of restrictive policies being adopted all over the region in the name of stemming the Islamist threat. In essence radical Islamism is portrayed as an external threat to state security while the root of this problem in Central Asia is likely to be found internally.

Radical Islamism threatens regime security rather than the state. Regime-challenging ideologies are obviously a grave concern for the governments of Central Asia. They all struggle with corruption and with providing even a minimal level of public goods and services to their respective populations. Unemployment is high in all the Central Asian countries, and the populations rely heavily on remittances from family members working abroad. Russia is where most go to find work, but this may become more difficult as the Russian economy is in recession. Additionally, Russia has imposed stricter rules on labour migration for non-EAEU (Eurasian Economic Union) member



Central Asia (Map by Per Wikström, FOI)

countries. The new rules benefit labour migration from the EAEU countries and are therefore likely to hit Tajik and Uzbek migrant workers particularly hard for as long as those countries remain outside the union.

As with the North Caucasus, radicalisation in Central Asia cannot be explained only as an issue of ideology imposed from the outside. It is also a product of several internal factors like a lack of political and economic opportunities, of religious and secular education, and limited rights to express political grievances. Terrorism is not the real fear of the Central Asian regimes, but rather the prospect of Islamic ideology and Islamic organisations mobilising anti-government sentiments and potentially offering alternative forms of governance.

The emergence of IS poses a potential threat to the Central Asian regimes both ideologically and organisationally. Aside from bringing ideology to the table, the IS appeals to the feeling of disenfranchisement among Central Asian and North Caucasian recruits by giving them a sense of purpose, while at the same time offering them a much-needed financial benefit. The rise of IS on the world stage could exacerbate the existing repressive tendencies of the governments in the region.

The problem of radicalisation and jihadism in Russia and Central Asia will require a broad range of countermeasures. Implementing counterterrorism efforts may be necessary, but imposing further restrictions on political and religious freedoms are repressive measures which would further exacerbate the authoritarian nature of the state. The real challenge is to find the balance between effective counterterrorism tools and address socio-political root causes of dissatisfaction. Neither the Central Asian countries nor Russia have the kind of economic muscle or the political will to carry out much-needed political and economic reforms. Given the economic recession in Russia, and its impact not just on Russia itself but also on Central Asia, the odds for social improvement in these areas look set to get worse.

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