

Radical Islamism in Georgia

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The paper describes and analyzes the chronology of radical Islamism activities in Georgia, the threats and challenges for Georgian state coming from terrorist organizations, the spread of Ideas of Militant Islamism and Jihadism, the possibilities of using Georgian territories by the foreign and local fighters and steps taken by Georgian State. Also popularization of the idea of creation world Islamic Caliphate in the Middle East and ISIL Caucasus Province, joining the terrorist organizations ISIL and Al-Nusra Front in Iraq and Syria by some of the Georgian Muslims. The author analyzes the factors of the popularization of radical Islamism ideas among the young generation, the problems of Georgian Muslim communities and gives the recommendations for state actors.

Keywords: Georgia, Caucasus, Fundamentalism, Salafism, Radical Islamism, Jihadism, Terrorism, terrorist groups, ISIL, ISIS, Al-Qaeda, foreign fighters

The ongoing conflicts in Syria and Iraq—and particularly the establishment of a “caliphate” by self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS) in June 2014—underlined the importance of transnational links among Georgian Muslim communities¹ (10,7% of population of Georgia are Muslims).²

The spread of Islamic Fundamentalism—Salafism and its Radical forms—Islamist extremism and Jihadism in Georgia is connected with the ongoing conflicts in North Caucasian Region, where Jihadism expanded largely during the Chechen-Russian conflicts after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Chechen refugees who had fled to Georgia, namely to the Pankisi Gorge after the beginning of the Second Chechen war in 1999, were put up by the local Kist³ families. Following them Chechen rebels and Al Qaeda operatives appeared in Pankisi Gorge,⁴ trying to reach Chechnya through Georgia using it as a transit corridor. A flow of refugees was followed by the groups of fighters, who periodically crossed Georgian territory to restock supplies, visit families, and undergo treatment.⁵

Foreign Islamists, Chechen and Kist Salafis, who were involved in the conflict, appealed to the followers of Sufi brotherhoods (tariqats) Naqshbandiya and Qadiriya,⁶ so-called followers of Traditional Islam—to convert them to “Pure Islam,” to make them abandon their traditional customary law—*Adat* and replace it with Sharia law. Since that time, the Kist Sufis call the Salafis “Wahhabists”—they do not agree on the so called Wahabies radicalism in religious issues, revision of “traditional Islam” and the idea of returning to “Pure Islam,”⁷ and blame them in “Arabization” of the Kist society.⁸

In 2000s, the Pankisi Gorge was an uncontrolled area, where the guerrilla forces of Ruslan Gelayev⁹ and criminal authorities were operating. The Pankisi Gorge was associated with illegal drug trafficking, kidnapping

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for ransom and other types of organized crimes.¹⁰ In 2002, Georgian law enforcement forces began to recover the control over the Pankisi gorge.¹¹ The illegal groups of fighters and crimes were fully eradicated after the rule of the Government of Georgia had been established in the territory of Pankisi Gorge. So called Wahhabists managed to find ways to co-exist under the rule of governance of the Georgian government after the *Pankisi Crisis*. According to different data, the majority of the population of Pankisi Gorge is the believers of Salafi Islam, and 60-80% of young generation has turned to Salafism.¹² At the same time, there are groups of peaceful and radical Salafies.

The radical Salfies were not characterized by high levels of activities until the conflict in Syria has began, but the participation of dozens of citizens of Georgia in the Syrian conflict, the joining of young Islamists, including school children to ISIL and the detention of the spiritual leader of Pankisi, who was charged with the participation of terrorist groups and recruiting potential terrorists revealed that the situation in the Pankisi Gorge was rather complicated.

Admittedly, if the spread of Salafism and its forms in the Pankisi Gorge is connected with the ongoing conflicts in North Caucasian Region, it can be concluded that the Salafism was mainly distributed in Adjara and the regions of Guria inhabited by Adjarian Muslims by local people who had obtained theological education abroad.

The distribution of the ideas of Salafism in the region in some cases was followed by spreading the ideas of radical Islamism, consequently the radicals, residing in Adjara were involved in Syrian conflict and they issued chilling threats against Georgia.

The problem of radicalization had affected the part of ethnic Azeris who live in Georgia, because some of them are the members of *Jamaats* operating in their settlements and support the ideas of Islamism. A small number of Islamists reside in Tbilisi, in particular in Ponichala district.

It is important, to reveal the attempts of conversion to a radical Islamism of traditionally non-Muslim Georgians and their recruitment in the terrorist organization.

Modern Threats and Challenges: As a result of ongoing conflicts in Syria and Iraq and the membership of Georgian citizens in the terrorist organizations, the following categories posing threat to Georgia have been identified:

Entering terrorist groups into the territory of Georgia—possibility of planning terrorist attacks, diversions, and creation local networks. This problem has been clearly demonstrated when Akhmed Chatayev, i.e., Ahmed One-Arm, a member of so-called Islamic State (IS), was identified among three militants killed during a 20-hour siege in Tbilisi. Georgian state security said DNA tests had confirmed that Chatayev blew himself up in the besieged apartment.¹³ In 2015, A. Chatayev has released public threat against Georgia. According to the information spread by the Prosecutor's Office, he demanded the release of arrested Islamist citizens of Georgia and threatened the government of Georgia by acts of violence unless his demands were satisfied.¹⁴ According to the US Treasury Department, Ahmed Chatayev (who is also known as Ahmed al-Shishani) has been enlisted in the list of international terrorists due to his connection with the ISIL.¹⁵ The name of A. Chatayev is connected with the 26 July Istanbul Atatürk Airport attack. According to the released information, he is thought to have been the planner of the attack.¹⁶ Ahmed Chatayev's name is also connected with special operation in the Lopota gorge (Georgia) in August 2012.¹⁷

On December 26, 2017, State Security Service of Georgia announced about detaining 5 citizens of Georgia linked to A. Chayaev's group on charges of Financing, Providing other Material Support and Resources to

Terrorist Activities. According to the SSSG, A. Chatayev and his accomplices planned to carry out terrorist attacks at diplomatic missions in Georgia and Turkey. Also there was established that the detained person during 21-22 special operation was a citizen of Russia Shoaip Borziev,¹⁸ who is wanted by Interpol on terrorism charges. Identities of individuals killed in the course of special operation are also established: citizen of Russia Ibragim Adashev, who travelled to Georgia in 2010-2012 with various fake passports and Aslanbeg Soltakhmadov.¹⁹ According to State Security Service, one of the blamed youngsters Temirlan Machalikhvili was wounded during the 26.12.2017 special operation when he tried to throw a grenade to Special troop's fighters. He died after few days in the hospital. The young men's relatives denied the above mentioned version.²⁰ Their lawyer alleges that the hand grenade was planted on.²¹

On January 9, 2018, Z. Idoidze was arrested²² and on January 22, 2018, Anatoli Berdzenishvili who according to SSSG assisted A. Chatayev and his group members to cross Turkish-Georgian border.²³

Before these special operations:

On September 13, 2013, Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia spread statement on the detention of Piruz Tsulukidze, Temur Bakhuntaridze, and ethnic Chechen IusuP Lakaev, 25-year-old citizen of Russian Federation. Tsulukidze planned to assist the foreigner to depart to Turkey through illegal crossing of the Georgian state border. T. Bakhuntaridze also assisted them. When patrol police crew requested Lakaev to submit ID documents, the latter resisted them and fired several times to the direction of police officers.²⁴ Lakaev could be a convenient patsy, simultaneously implicating the North Caucasus emirate.²⁵

On June, 2015, Counter-Terrorist Centre detained Imam of Jokolo A. Borchashvili who enjoyed the status of representative of ISIL, G. Kuprava, G. Khutunishvili, and D. Firisebia, in assessing to foreign terrorist organization and supporting the terrorist activities. All of them were found guilty and sentenced.²⁶

In November, 2015, the citizen of Georgia D. Borchashvili was detained for the joining the terrorist organization ISIL and supporting the terrorist activities.²⁷

On November 23, 2015, the video appeal called "A message to Georgians" was released first by the Russian-language website of ISIS "Furat Media" and later by the Georgian extremist site "Caliphate World Press."²⁸ So called Imam of ISIL in Western Georgia, 22 year old Khvicha Gobadze—Abu-Mariam together with other Georgian Jihadists threatened the State of Georgia and their citizens with slaughter.²⁹

In addition, several videos and written threats were released by Tamaz Chagalidze Ahmad Al-jurji.³⁰ According to the released, the mentioned person posted in one of social networks closed groups the statement on behalf of Muvahid Muvahid and appealed to the members to submit the full names, photos and addresses of enemies of Islam.³¹

In December, 2015, The Counter-Terrorist Centre detained several persons in connection with charges for joining terrorist organizations in Guria and Adjara.³²

In July, 2016, The Counterterrorism Centre detained the resident of village Duisi, Akhmeta region, V. Khangoshvili on the fact of the threat of terrorism. The investigation established, that on July 29, 2016, the detainee disseminated information that contained terrorism threat, though social network *Facebook* under the username—Dau Levski.³³

Reinforcing Islamic Radicalism and aggregating foreign missionary activities in Georgia have become vivid in the Pankisi Gorge, Adjara, Gurian villages inhabited by Adjarian Muslims, Tbilisi (Ponichala), Telavi District, where according to the verified information, natives have joined terrorist organizations and participate or died in ongoing conflicts in Syria and Iraq. Particular persons conduct work in Muslim societies to convert

believers to radicalism for the purposes of engaging them in terrorist activities in the mentioned regions.

Foreign missionary conduct not only religious, but ideological propaganda campaigns for the local populations, which has nothing in common with general religious studies. With the given respect, it is worth noting that the religious literature, which is ordered in large print runs, is prepared for political purposes and is freely distributed to Georgia.³⁴

The activities of radicals were moved to the internet after the strict control had been established by the police authorities. A number of groups, which conduct propaganda of Islamism, translate and spread extremist literature and speeches of the leaders of terrorist organizations into Georgian become active periodically in Georgian virtual space, especially in different social networks. ISIS supporters become active in the internet space of Georgia periodically; Georgian Islamists created Georgian informative web-pages of caliphate such as <https://xalifati.wordpress.com>; they launch *Vkontakte* and *Facebook* close and open groups, which contain violent statements as well as photo and video materials.

Introducing the strict control on the internet usage in modern democratic society will lead to fierce criticism from the part of human rights organizations or civil society, because there is a risk of exercising control over opposing or critically thinking groups as well as representatives of media from the part of law enforcement authorities, which hinders the provision of relevant contingency actions in certain cases.

Popularization of the ideas of extremism and creation of so called Caliphate in Muslim communities of Georgia. Apart of Muslim citizens of Georgia, who do not participate directly in the activities of the terrorist organizations, justify them and promote the idea of Islamic Caliphate which includes Caucasian region as well as Georgia. Islamists present Islamic Caliphate as the only guarantee for the protection of Muslim rights and admit that leading a complete Islamic life will be possible only within the Caliphate in their propaganda campaigns.

The part of representatives of the mentioned groups directly appeal and support the participation of the citizens of Georgia in Syrian conflict within the terrorist groups. Part of them idolizes the fighters theoretically and demonstrated them as “fighters for religion and justice.” The given tendency is supported by the fighters from Georgia who participate in the conflict, the part of which have managed to occupy the certain hierarchical position in the terrorist organizations or sacrificed their lives in Jihad.

Recruitment of Georgian citizens (including the youth and school children) are in the terrorist organizations. According to the data of the State Security Service of Georgia in 2015 approximately 50 Georgian citizens have departed to Syria and Iraq from Georgia for terrorism aims³⁵ (mainly from the Pankisi Gorge, as well as Adjara and other territories of eastern Georgia inhabited by Azerbaijanis). Most of them were from the Pankisi Gorge and fought in the support of the ISIL and other terrorist groups, 26 of them died during the conflict.³⁶

Top positions were held in the terrorist groups by the following fighters from the Pankisi Gorge: Tarkhan Batirashvili, i.e., Abu Umar Al-Shishani, the senior ISIL commander,³⁷ Giorgi Kushtanashvili/Paizul Margoshvili (Salahuddin Shishani),³⁸ Ruslan Machalikashvili—Seifullah Shishani³⁹ etc.

Till today active warlords in Syria are: Murad Margoshvili—Muslim Abu Walid Ash-Shishani,⁴⁰ Adam (Guram) Gumashvili, who sent the audio message in which he appeals his villagers to support and join ISIS.⁴¹

The vast majority of fighters were young people (the average age of the fighters is 25⁴²), including school children (M. Kushtanashvili and R. Bagakashvili died in Syria⁴³); Still fully uninvestigated how the underage person managed to cross the state border). The representative of the Council of Elders Kh. Khangoshvili

emphases constantly: *Wahhabis* mainly work on adolescents, schoolchildren. They convert and summon them to their mosque. Once they summon a person, they keep influencing them by the means of propaganda and agitation and afterwards it is impossible to rescue these children from their claws.⁴⁴ The problem of unemployment, education, and involvement into the social-cultural life is particularly crucial in the Pankisi Gorge.

It is also well-known fact that the ethnic Azeri inhabitants of the village of Karjala, Telavi region went to Syria, one of them B. Mukhtarov, a doctor by profession was killed during the airstrike on February 12, 2016.⁴⁵ According to the media, two women from the above mentioned village, Irada Gharibova and Anna Suleimanova left for Syria via Turkey.⁴⁶ Also an ethnic Azeri female from Gerogia Aidan Garibova is in list of INTERPOL, wanted by Judicial authorities of Russian Federation for participation in the activity of a terrorist organization and participation in an illegal armed formation.⁴⁷

The problems of Islamism and Radicalization have become vivid in the outskirts of Tbilisi, Ponichala and its residents claim that a person has also departed to Syria from their settlement.⁴⁸

The Imam of Salafi Community of Ponichala states that Radical Islamist—*Kharijites* (Arabic “those that seceded”) represent the threat for not only Christians and other religions but for Islam itself, because they consider themselves as Muslims and commit crimes on behalf of Islam. Also he claims that his parish is actively resisting people with the ideas of extremism in peaceful manner and provides them with no opportunity to conduct propaganda. It was also mentioned that Radicals are excluded from the parish as they do not live according to the Pure Islam.⁴⁹

Also we see the attempts of radicalization of traditionally non-Muslim citizens, their recruitment for terrorist organizations and engagement in the Syrian conflict: the cases of G. Khutunishvili, D. Pirisebia, G. Kuprava.⁵⁰

Using Georgia as the part of Trans Caucasian corridor for Jihadists is also the serious threat for Georgian security. Jihadists from Russia and also from Central Asia tried to use Georgia to get to Turkey and then to Syria.⁵¹ ISIL militants have begun using a new route through Azerbaijan, Cyprus, and Georgia to transfer their suicide bombers from Syria to Europe, Turkish daily *Milliyet* reported on July 11, 2016 citing intelligence officials.⁵²

After the ISIS has weakened in the Middle East, there is a big probability that Jihadists from Georgia and Caucasus region will use to get back through Georgia and they would try to cooperate with native Islamists and actively radicalize Georgian Muslim communities.

As Georgia is an important contributor of coalition authorities, it is directly engaged in combating terrorism, and this may serve as a reason for Georgia to get into the circumstances posing the threat from the terrorist organizations. Several attempts were made to release via the Internet, the Georgian Ex-Imam M. Paichadze who joined ISIS threatened Georgia to withdraw Georgian troops from Muslim states.⁵³

Desire of the Russian Federation is to use the increasing cases of Islamic Extremism to exercise the diplomatic suppression on Georgia and conduct the possibility for direct intervention or airstrike in the territory of Georgia (the policy Russia used during the Crisis in the Pankisi Gorge⁵⁴). The Russian Federation constantly accuses Georgia for giving asylum to terrorists and providing transit corridors for them in their territory. The officials of the Russian Federation speak permanently about the threats emerging from the Pankisi Gorge.⁵⁵

The opportunities for the conversion of prisoners and their recruitment for terrorist groups by persons convicted in terrorism and detained in the Georgian Penitentiary System in 2014-2018. In the western states,

Islamists are actively engaged in radicalization process after the imprisonment.⁵⁶ Georgian state does not have an appropriate experience with this respect.

Steps taken by the state for combating radicalization and terrorist organizations are as follows:

Significant articles were added to Criminal Code of Georgia. Article 323₂ (participation in international terrorism) was added to the new edition of the Code. According to the given Article, the participation in international terrorism, and/or military support to a foreign country or the authorities of it (that country), to a group of persons or to other physical or legal persons, committed for terrorist purposes, shall be punished by imprisonment for a term of twelve to seventeen years.

Article 327₁⁵⁷ (recruiting a person as a member of a terrorist organization or for carrying out terrorist activities) had been added. According to the given title, recruiting a person as a member of a terrorist organization or for carrying out terrorist activities, shall be punished by imprisonment for a term of five to ten years. It is worth to emphasize Article 328, according to which “joining a foreign terrorist organization or a terrorist organization controlled by a foreign state or supporting this organization in terrorist activities, shall be punished by imprisonment for a term of ten to seventeen years.” And finally the importance of Article 330₁ (open support of terrorist activities and/or a terrorist organization or public incitement to terrorism) is to be underlined. According to the given Article, open support of terrorist activities and/or a terrorist organization orally, in writing or by other forms of expression if such action creates a clear, immediate and substantial risk of terrorist activities, shall be punished by imprisonment from three up to six years.⁵⁸

The law enforcement authorities of Georgia have established strict boundary control and managed to stop the flow of persons, who had connections with Islamists, to Syria from Georgia as well as their keep registration. The database of such persons was developed. In addition, the police authorities register the aliens who travel through Georgia as transit passengers and regularly exchange data with international partners to identify terrorist suspects when required. The given actions were evaluated positively in the reports of the US State Department.⁵⁹

In addition, it is worth mentioning that the Georgian Security authorities banned and shut down the Georgia language web-sites of Islamists and respond against them in the case of their resumption.

Despite the above-mentioned, Georgia still faces terrorist threats, because the complete eradication of the terrorist threats is not possible.

Recommendations:

After the incident with Chatayev and his group in Tbilisi, state has to investigate the case connections of arrested persons to terrorist groups (State Security Service has to prove the blame and connections to terrorism of the killed youngster T. Machalikashvili during the special operation or has to recognize a made mistake to stabilize the situation in the Pankisi Gorge) and intense the border control to prevent further illegal border crossings. The state should be ready to prevent creation of terrorist and extremist cells after the Georgian Jihadists would come back to their homeland. Based on these facts, establishing close cooperation between security services, retraining stuff and creating relevant platforms for exchanging information and developing appropriate contingency plans are essential for the prevention of radicalism in Georgia. The officers of entities that are engaged in combating terrorism should attend training programs in the countries (Israel, USA) which are experienced in countering terrorism. The cooperation between special services of partner countries should be increased.

The Articles 328, 330₁, 330₂ of the Criminal Code of Georgia must be fully taken into consideration in the

process of identifying favorable circumstances for radicalization and persons engaged in this process with full severity. The persons, who demonstrate anti-state and anti-constitutional approaches, who provide the support of “The Caucasus Emirate,” “ISIL Caucasus Province,” or other terrorist organizations and who appeal to citizens to join them or get engaged in their activities (directly or indirectly) must be deprived the right to conduct religious activities and to preach. As following the state has to provide information campaign about illegal actions connected to terrorism support and radicalization activities and their consequences. The state must actively cooperate with Muslim communities, who are motivated to expose the activities of radicals and disclose their inclination to extremist on the theological level.

The persons, convicted in terrorism and the membership of terrorist organization, shall be placed separately in prison in order not to give them the chance to conduct recruitment of prospect members. If we base our review on the practices of other countries, we will clearly realize the vast space uncontrolled by prison administration and the opportunities that may be opened to the representatives of extremist-terrorist organizations in prison to conduct recruitment and ideological conversion of persons subject to their interest successfully.

The state has to support social, economical, and cultural development in the problem regions, solve the issues of unemployment and education, because all of these factors create the environment for radicalization, popularization, and heroization of Jihadists. In particular, the state has to find the ways for dialogue with Salafi communities to prevent their stigmatization and help them to integrate into the modern Georgian society.

The creation of State Agency for Religious Issues can be considered as a step forward, but it is essential that the institute should cooperate with the representatives of different Muslim schools on the equal grounds and does not give priority to a single religious union. Unfortunately, the latter fact is vivid from the part of the Agency at present by giving priority to *The Administration of Muslims of All Georgia*. The given fact causes dissatisfaction from the part of other Islamic unions. The above-mentioned circumstances give rise to the temptation of finding the ways to obtain foreign financial support by religious groups, who believe that the state does not cooperate with them.

The activities of so-called religious charities, which are noticed in supporting extremism or extremist ideas shall be banned in the territory of Georgia. The operation of organizations and funds, which are banned from different countries due to financing terrorism or extremist groups, should be forbidden in Georgia as well.

I agree with the expert view that Muslim youth should be able to obtain information and education regarding their religion and history from objective sources rather than from extremists and various social networks.⁶⁰

A serious problem is stemmed from the return of certain citizens to Georgia who obtained education in different foreign countries, because the part of them form Jamaats with the help of foreign financial support, and this may turn the members of these Jamaats into the tools for provision of interests of foreign country or religious funds. The formation of highly qualified Islamic educational institute must be in the national interests of Georgia. On the initial stage, the faculty, which will prepare religious experts and clergymen, can be created within any of Georgia universities. The Ministry of Education of Georgia must be engaged in the implementation of the above-mentioned activity; it must allocate the financial resources and support the formation of faculty within the state or private university, where highly qualified specialists will be employed.

The possibility of deprivation of Georgian citizenship to persons participating in the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East or joining the terrorist organizations should be reviewed and regulated by the law in order to

prevent further complications to the state.

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